US INFANTRY – VIETNAM

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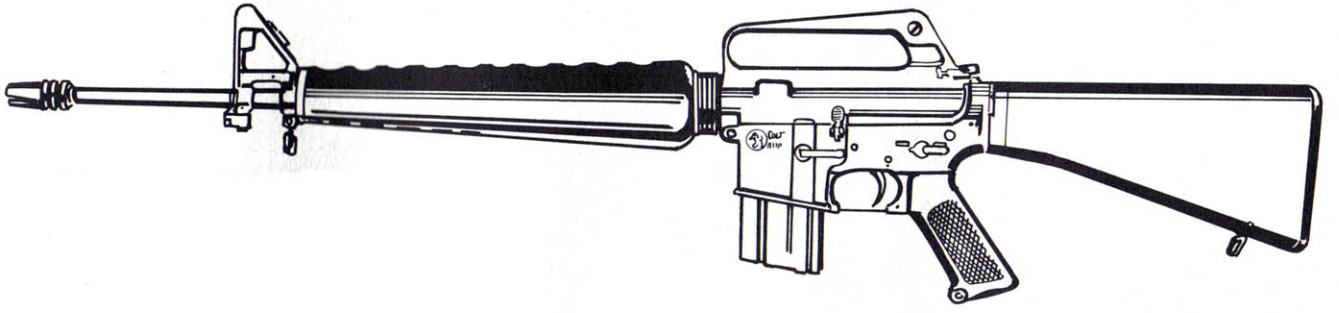
by Jim Mesko
illustrated by Amy Harroff



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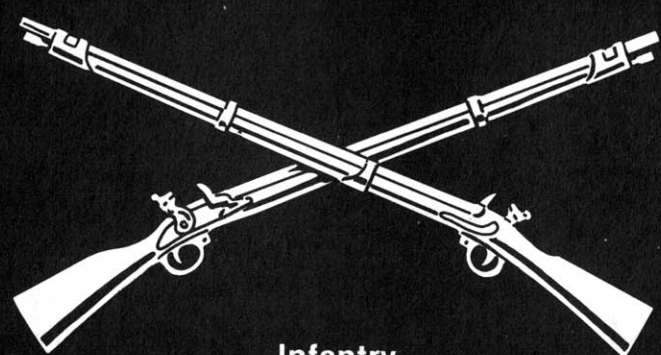
A machinegunner from the 25th Infantry Division fires on a Viet Cong position during operation CEDAR FALLS in January 1967. He still wears the early style combat boots and fatigues rather than the later issue jungle boots and jungle fatigues.



Infantry

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DEDICATION

To all of the men and women who served in Vietnam, but especially to the "Grunts" who bore the brunt of the fighting.

PHOTO CREDITS

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The grim horror of war. Two men from the 173rd Airborne Brigade await a helicopter to carry the body of a comrade from the battlefield. (US Army)

INTRODUCTION

The first U.S. casualty in Vietnam was an army colonel who died in an ambush in Saigon during September of 1945. The last US servicemen to die in Vietnam were two U.S. marines who lost their lives in a rocket attack near Tan Son Nhut airport in April of 1975. During the intervening thirty years, approximately 56,000 Americans died in this worn torn land, with the bulk of these casualties occurring between the years 1962 and 1971. The majority of these US servicemen died, not in the sophisticated jet aircraft over North Vietnam, nor on the vast array of sophisticated ships in the Tonkin Gulf, but slugging it out in a vicious no quarter guerrilla war waged in the hot steaming countryside of South Vietnam. They fought against an enemy equipped with weapons ranging from primitive punji stakes to large caliber artillery. The enemy included the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), the indigenous Viet Cong (VC), and innocent looking civilians (men, women *and* children). The US Soldiers who fought this brutal war were mostly eighteen and nineteen year old draftees, often just out of high school. They were the infantry, the *Queen of Battle*. However, few, if any of these soldiers felt any glamour in slogging through the thick, insect ridden jungles or snake infested swamps, in their pursuit of an elusive foe. They soon coined a new word in the military dictionary, GRUNT, which they took as their badge of courage. And despite all the new technology introduced during the conflict, Vietnam was the infantryman's war. What follows is the story of the men who really fought the war in Vietnam, the infantry.

Terrain And Weather Conditions

A particular problem which faced U.S. commanders was the widely diverse terrain and weather conditions in Vietnam. Basically the country is divided into five major geographic regions each of which dictated certain tactics within that area. Following the dictates of these geographical areas the country was divided into military districts or Corps.

IV Corps

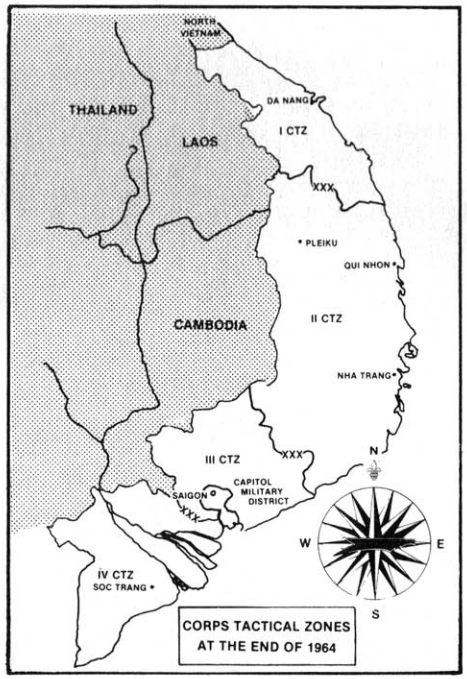
In the extreme south the Mekong Delta was crisscrossed by an extensive series of rivers and canals which watered numerous rice paddies and swamps. Even during the dry season the area was ill-suited for armored vehicles or motor transport, and during the monsoon season movement was nearly impossible. This area encompassed most of IV Corps and was the chief food production center of the country and contained most of the country's population.

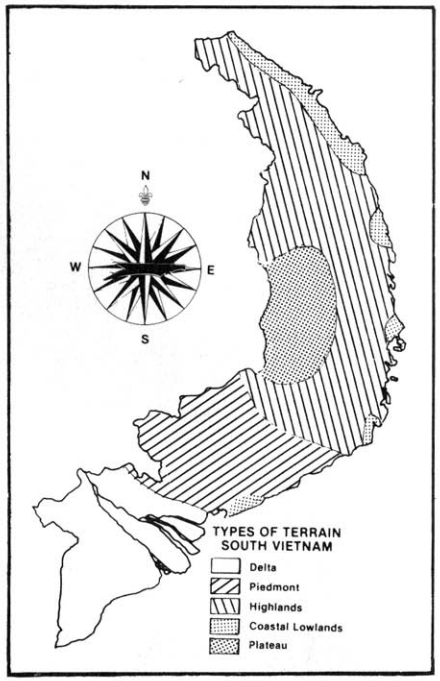
III Corps

North-west of the Mekong Delta was a piedmont region which occupied III Corps. This piedmont was characterized by gently rolling hills and broad plains with lush vegetation. This made the terrain well suited for mechanized units, and throughout the war tanks and APCs played a prominent part in the war effort there. Within the boundaries of III Corps were located the infamous jungle bases of the Iron Triangle, War Zone C and D, and the major infiltration routes from Viet Cong sanctuaries in Cambodia.

II Corps

As Vietnam turns northward the terrain changes from rolling piedmont to the rugged central highlands. Numerous mountain ranges, cut by steep river valleys, are typical and are covered with dense forests. Few roads exist in this area and most troop and supply movements were by air. Tracked vehicle movement was extremely limited and the use of helicopters was greatly restricted because of a lack of landing zones (LZs). If conditions were not bad enough, inclement weather and dense fog further hampered operations. The only break in this rugged terrain was a rolling plateau on the western fringes of the highlands toward the Cambodian-Loatian Border. These geographic features made up most of II Corps, although there were a few areas of coastal lowlands at the foot of these hills.





An innocent looking farmer tills his rice paddy in Vietnam. However, when darkness fell this same farmer often turned into a Viet Cong guerrilla, carrying out attacks on ARVN and US positions. (US Army)

I Corps

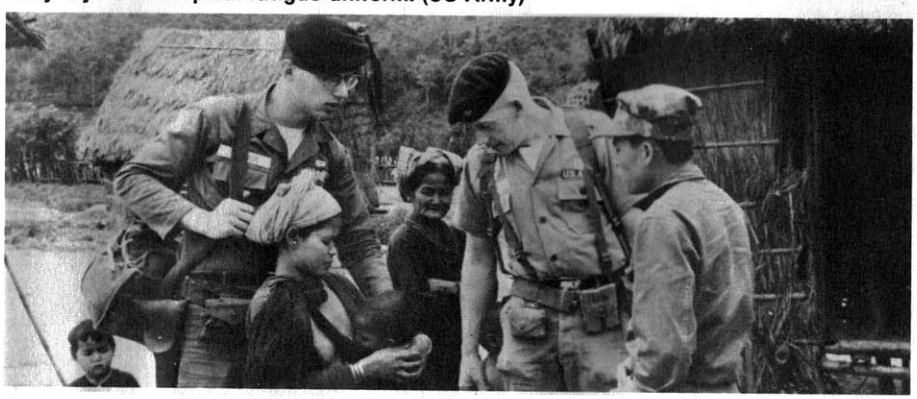
Coastal lowlands or plains were characteristic of the northeastern half of I Corps and extended roughly the entire length of this region to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the border with North Vietnam. The main geographic features of the I Corps area were sandy beaches, wide flat river valley, marshes, rice paddies, and rolling countryside. Because of these conditions, this area was the second most populated area of Vietnam and the source of numerous commercial centers and agriculture production. This coastal plain extended only a short distance inland before meeting the rugged highland terrain which continued north from II Corps. The population was dense and severely hampered the use of supporting fire during operations.

Since Vietnam was located just north of the equator, between 8 and 17 degrees north latitude, the climate was tropical. Throughout the year the temperature was uniformly hot with varying degrees of humidity and rainfall. During the summer months the area from the piedmont, south experienced the torrential rains of the monsoon season with rainfall of nearly 80 inches. North of the piedmont in the highlands and coastal plains the monsoons came in the winter, with an average of over 100 inches of rainfall. The humidity rotted clothing, rusted equipment, and caused tremendous personal discomfort. On the other end were hot temperatures often in excess of 100°, clear skies, and little rainfall or humidity. Because of these climatic differences, the level of operations throughout the country varied from area to area during the seasons and made coordinated planning difficult across geographic and corps boundaries.

The Early Years

The first Americans to become involved in Vietnam were members of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of the C.I.A. This came about toward the end of World War II when the OSS began helping the various guerrilla groups fighting the Japanese in Indochina. The major group involved in this struggle was the Viet Minh, led by Ho Chi Minh, an avowed communist. With the end of the war the French moved to reassert control over their colony. Other countries, including the U.S., dispatched military personnel to help in reoccuppying the area and pave the way for a smooth transition of power between the Japanese, French, and nationalist forces. Under such circumstances trouble was an almost certainty, and as the various groups came into contact, fighting erupted. The Americans were caught in the middle of this political struggle but tried to remain neutral. However, after an OSS colonel was killed in an ambush in September 1945 near Saigon, they realized that there was little they could do to prevent full scale fighting between French forces and the Viet Minh especially since neither side was willing to make concessions. With in a few months this became a reality as the Viet Minh carried out a series of attacks against the French. A cease fire of sorts followed but in November of 1946 the war began in earnest and dragged on until the French were finally defeated in the climactic battle at Dien Bien Phu in May of 1954.

The first US troops in Vietnam were advisors and helicopter pilots. These two advisors are members of the 5th Special Forces Group, the elite "Green Berets". They are wearing the early style non-tropical fatigue uniform. (US Army)



During the French-Indochina War the main assistance the United States provided was military aid although on occasion technical advisors and mechanics were temporarily stationed in Vietnam to train French personnel in the use of American equipment. Just prior to the fall of Dien Bien Phu, a group of air force mechanics were sent to help the overworked French ground crews as they struggled to keep the small French air force in operation against the Viet Minh. But the Eisenhower administration steadfastly refused to commit U.S. ground forces to the war in order to turn the tide against the communists. It was felt that any such effort would turn into both a political and military disaster. Thus the French cause was doomed, and following the fall of Dien Bien Phu, a ceasefire was agreed to and the eventual withdrawal of all French forces from Indochina.

The Geneva Accord, signed on July 21st, 1954, called for a temporary partition of Vietnam pending reunification by means of a national election. This election never took place. The pro-Western leader of the south, Ngo Diem, with U.S. support, proclaimed the Republic of South Vietnam. Diem felt that the communists would never allow *free* elections. Official recognition by the United States soon followed, and with this came military and economic aid. As the French advisors to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) withdrew, American personnel began replacing them until over 300 were in-country by the late 1950s. This American advisory force under designation Military Assistance Advisors Group (MAAG) had the responsibility for the training of the South Vietnamese Army and distribution of all military aid. The communists realizing that their chances for uniting Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh by means of the election were lost, turned to guerrilla warfare in an attempt to undermine Diem. As part of their plan, US installations and personnel were singled out for special attention. The first American casualties were two military advisors who were killed in a terrorist raid on Bien Hoa air base in the spring of 1959. As additional attacks occurred, ARVN forces, trained in conventional tactics, proved unable to counter the elusive guerrillas. Additional advisors were brought in during 1960, raising the strength of MAAG to 685 men, but even this had little effect on the overall war effort.

In January of 1961, the newly elected US President, John F Kennedy took office and in one of his first major foreign policy decisions, he approved a new counterinsurgency plan for Vietnam. This called for additional advisors and equipment along with some support and aviation units to help improve ARVN mobility. In December two helicopter companies arrived in country to carry South Vietnamese troops into combat against the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. Following close on the heels of these units were elements of the 5th Special Forces Group, the famous "Green Berets" who were assigned to train various jungle and hill tribes in the art of modern warfare. With this influx of advisors and support personnel it was only to be expected that sooner or later they would become involved in clashes with the communists. By the beginning of 1962 the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam had risen to over 3000, yet even this substantial increase failed to help the South Vietnamese counter the growing strength of the guerrillas. More troops were sent in, and by the end of 1962 there were 11,000 US personnel stationed throughout Vietnam. Some progress was made in countering the enemy but widespread corruption in the Diem government negated advances on the battlefield. Dissatisfied with Diem, the Vietnamese army overthrew his regime in October 1963*, and set up a series of sort-lived civilian and military governments. In the face of the expanding war this government accomplished little, even with the doubling of U.S. personnel. By the middle of 1964 over 180 Americans had been killed while nearly 1000 had suffered wounds, along with 55,000 South Vietnamese casualties. In August of 1964, the North Vietnamese attacked U.S. destroyers in international waters which resulted in reprisal air attacks against their facilities. Within a few days President Johnson received congressional approval in the form of the *Tonkin Gulf Resolution* to use whatever forces he deemed necessary to counter the growing aggression of North Vietnam.

Shortly after Diem's overthrow and murder, President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas.

U.S. Ground Troops Arrive

Until 1965 no U.S. ground troops had been sent to Vietnam, although some security and support units had been deployed to guard American installations or provide logistical support to the advisors and helicopter units. By late 1964 the Viet Cong had formed its battalions into regiments and these regiments into divisions. With this structural change many observers felt the VC were shifting to the final "mobile" phase of their guerrilla campaign with the introduction of conventional type organization and tactics against ARVN.

In early 1965 the appearance of regular NVA units gave credence to this theory. As spring approached the tempo of fighting increased dramatically. In addition to attacking ARVN units and positions, the communists began a systematic campaign of terror against US personnel throughout Vietnam. In response to this, the air war against North Vietnam increased dramatically until bombing attacks became an almost daily occurence. In a further response to these attacks against American personnel and installations the decision was made to commit ground troops to provide additional protection. In March the first battalion of a marine regiment landed at Da Nang to guard the sprawling airbase there. Soon the full regiment with its armor and artillery were dug in around the base. Although this commitment of ground troops and the stepped up bombing campaign raised ARVN morale, the VC and the NVA increased their attacks against government positions. By late spring the South Vietnamese were losing the equivalent of a battalion of infantry and a district capital a week to the elusive enemy. Both US leaders and the South Vietnamese government realized that they faced a monumental crisis. Unless massive numbers of American and allied ground troops were immediately committed it was only a matter of time until the communists took control of South Vietnam. In May the United States began to build up its forces to counter the enemy's growing strength and boldness.

The first army unit deployed as a result of this decision was the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the "Sky Soldiers", which were in reserve on Okinawa. They were airlifted into the airfield at Bien Hoa which was located just northeast of Saigon on Route 1. This base was also right next to the notorious War Zone D which the VC used as a staging, supply, and rest area for their attacks against Saigon and the surrounding government positions. With such a major enemy base so close it was inevitable that the VC would react to this new threat to their long held grip on the region. As the "Sky Soldiers" spread out around the base and began patrolling, inquisitive bands of VC observed them and on occasion exchanged small arms fire, resulting in casualties on both sides, the first suffered by army ground troops in Vietnam.

Into War Zone D

General William Westmoreland, the commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, received authorization to commit his troops against the VC if he felt the situation warranted such action. In response to VC probes around Bien Hoa, he ordered the 173rd to participate in a joint operation with ARVN and Australian troops in an assault on War Zone D, the first such action by US Army troops. Starting on June 28th, 3000 U.S. troops teamed up with Vietnamese airborne units and 800 Australians for a thrust into the communist stronghold. After three futile days the attack was called off because of a lack of substantial contact with the VC. One American was killed and nine were wounded in the operation, but enemy casualties were unknown. And although U.S. soldiers were frustrated at the lack of enemy contact, action would soon increase as more units arrived in-country and began going on the offensive against the communists.

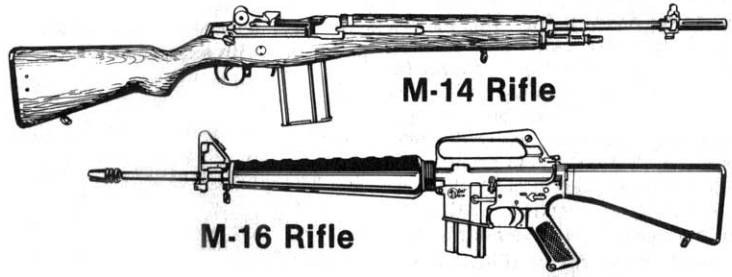
Troop Strength Increases

With the decision to commit U.S. ground forces, additional troops soon followed the "Sky Soldiers" to Vietnam. Shortly after the 173rd's aborted sweep was completed, the 2nd Brigade of the 1st Infantry Division (The Big Red One) began landing at Bien Hoa, as an advance element of the division which would arrive later in the year. This was the first

Members of the 173rd Airborne Brigade move along a road toward defensive positions near Bien Hoa airbase. The two vehicles are mechanical "Mules", a lightweight carrier designed for employment with airborne troops. (US Army)

Defensive positions of the 173rd Airborne Brigade at Bien Hoa during June of 1965. This unit was the first army ground force to be deployed to Vietnam and was initially sent to protect the airbase at Bien Hoa. (US Army)

Two members of the 1st Cav await transportation to their new base near Pleiku in the Central Highlands. Both are wearing the non-tropical uniforms which many of the troops were issued stateside prior to shipping out. These were eventually replaced by lightweight jungle uniforms which were better suited to Vietnam's tropical climate. (US Army)



(Above Left) Soldiers of the 1st Infantry Division check for booby traps during a sweep near Bien Hoa. The man on the left carries an old M-3 Grease Gun from World War II. A wide variety of weapons were used early in the war. (US Army)

(Left) A platoon leader from the 1st Infantry Division calls in support against sniper fire near Bien Hoa. The troops are equipped with M-14 rifles which had replaced the M-1 of WWII and had been used extensively in Korea. The M-14 was the standard infantry weapon at the time of the initial troop buildup in Vietnam. (US Army)

deployment of a conventional infantry unit to Vietnam. Close on the heels of the brigade came reinforcements for the 1st Logistical Command which provided support for the various American units already in-country and those scheduled for commitment. Eventually this organization would number close to 50,000 men and although not actually combat troops they often came into contact with the enemy in the various support roles they played.

As these increases raised U.S. troop levels, the VC and NVA continued to escalate the war, bringing in more men and carrying out more attacks. In battles around Quang Nagai city and the area northeast of Saigon ARVN troops suffered over twelve hundred casualties while the enemy's losses were minimal. In Saigon terrorist attacks took a heavy toll of civilian lives and undermined the people's faith in the South Vietnamese government. US and ARVN intelligence identified three NVA regiments, the 18th, 95th, and 101st, as being completely inside South Vietnam. As if to highlight this switch toward conventional tactics the communists launched a multi-battalion attack against the town of Duc Hoa, and chose to stand and slug it out with ARVN troops. This attack showed that the enemy was indeed planning to carry out the final conventional phase of the war before increased US strength could be effectively deployed to shore up the faltering South Vietnamese regime.

To counter this communist strategy more American forces were rushed in-country. At the end of July the 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division, the famous "Screaming Eagles", arrived at Cam Ranh Bay in II Corps. Shortly thereafter, in September, the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) began arriving with its component of helicopters. This division was unique as it was the first airmobile division within the U.S. Army. Unlike other conventional units which relied on mechanized transportation for movement, the 1st Cav used helicopters almost exclusively to move men, artillery, and supplies into battle. The decision to send this unit to Vietnam was based in part on the need to test the airmobile concept under actual battle conditions. If the concept proved valid it would be an invaluable tactic to counter the communists foot mobility in a countryside devoid of adequate road facilities for conventionally equipped forces. Upon its arrival, General Westmoreland decided to move the division into the highlands area to counter the growing communist strength, and, intelligence reports of a possible enemy offensive. The division moved from the coast by helicopter to An Khe, a town midway between Pleiku and Qui Nhon along Route 19, and began hacking out a division size base near the small town. To cover the unit's move the 173rd Airborne carried out OPERATION GIBRALTER to protect the cavalrymen and snare any inquisitive VC or NVA. This operation proved more successful than the earlier one in June and in three days of fighting the airborne troops killed over two hundred Viet Cong while taking minimal casualties themselves. Following GIBRALTER, the "Sky Soldiers" withdrew and the 1st Cav. put the finishing touches on their new home. As soon as the base was completed the unit's commander, General Harry Kinnard, began making probes with his helicopters to locate the elusive enemy, but few were found. However, within a short time the NVA would come out of hiding looking for a fight and the airmobile concept would undergo its first real test of battle in a river valley near the Cambodian-Vietnamese border. Here, also, would be tested the merits of a new generation of American infantrymen against a determined and ruthless enemy.

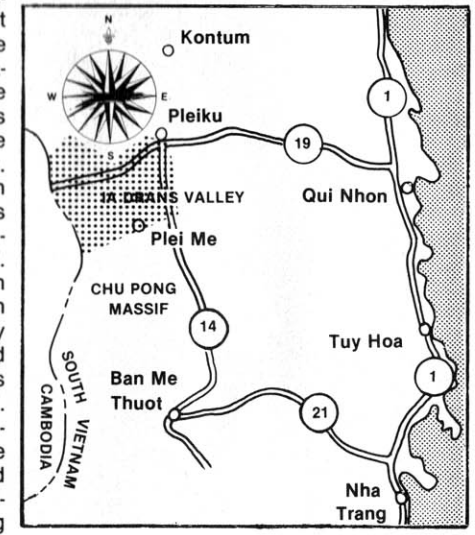
A captain from the 173rd Airborne uses the AN/PRC-25 radio, carried by his radioman, to contact one of his flanking platoons. Both men wear an early version of the jungle fatigue with exposed buttons. (US Army)

First Contact
The Ia Drang Valley

The first significant ground engagement with communist forces occurred during the fall of 1965 in the Ia Drang Valley, southwest of Pleiku, a major city in the Central Highlands. The action began when three NVA regiments, the 32nd, 33rd, and 66th, moved into the area and began preparations for an attack against the Plei Me Special Forces camp in mid-October. While one regiment, the 33rd, surrounded the camp the remaining two laid an ambush for the relief column which they anticipated would be sent from Pleiku once the assault began. The NVA hoped to draw the only ARVN reserves in the highlands area into the trap and completely annihilate the force. After this was accomplished the NVA anticipated an easy victory over the depleted forces at Pleiku and with this the complete control of the Central Highlands. Once this victory was consolidated the NVA command planned to push down to the coast and cut the country in half.

Although the exact nature of the enemy plans were not known at the time, General Westmoreland realized that something was afoot, and moved in elements of the newly arrived 1st Calvary Division. Task Force Ingram, composed of one infantry battalion and one artillery battery, was airlifted into Pleiku to provide assistance in defending the city or relieving the camp. While this move was underway, the division commander obtained permission to move the unit's 1st Brigade to Pleiku where it was to take over Task Force Ingram and carry out its assignment. While this move was afoot, the ARVN relief column attempting to relieve Plei Me was ambushed at two points by the concealed NVA regiments. In reaction to this attack massive air strikes and artillery support from the 1st Cav were called in, with deadly accuracy. Both attacks were repulsed and after hard fighting the column broke through to the camp. To further aid the camp's defenders a number of 1st Cav infantry and artillery units were airlifted into positions around the camp to encircle the NVA forces. Realizing the futility of further contact, the enemy commander disengaged and began pulling his troops back toward the Cambodian border.

In an effort to find the enemy forces the 1st Brigade was ordered to search the area and force the NVA to fight. Although occasional clashes occurred in the last part of October and early November no significant ground contact developed. However, from these contacts and intelligence reports, it was evident that NVA regiments were assembling in the Ia Drang Valley in preparation for another attack on Plei Me. On November 9th the 1st Brigade was replaced by the 3rd Brigade which was ordered to continue the operation. Five days later, on November 14th, the 1st Battalion, 7th Calvary (George Custer's old unit) was airlifted into Landing Zone X-Ray at the southern end of the valley. Although the LZ was not "hot", within an hour contact was made and a prisoner was captured who indicated that the NVA battalions were in the mountains above the LZ. Shortly thereafter the battalion began receiving heavy mortor fire and one platoon became cut off from its parent company. By late afternoon the enemy had surrounded the battalion and made a number of attacks on the three companies holding the LZ. Reinforcements were requested but accurate and intense ground fire drove off the helicopters before another company could be fully unloaded. Throughout the remainder of the day and into the evening



A platoon from the 101st Airborne prepares to board helicopters to aid units of the 1st Infantry Division under attack by the Viet Cong. All are carrying M-26-A1 hand grenades which replaced the old pineapple grenade from World War II. (US Army)

there was a constant seesaw battle as the NVA closed to point-blank range to engage the 1st Cav troopers. Hand to hand fighting took place and after some desperate moments the enemy was finally thrown back. Under cover of darkness reinforcements and supplies were ferried in and wounded were flown out.

A typical Viet Cong booby trap. Sharpened bamboo spikes, called punji stakes, were emplaced at the bottom of a hole and then covered over with vegetation in the hope that some soldier would step on them. Often the VC coated these with human or animal waste to make them septic. (US Army)

Throughout the remainder of the night and into the next day the fighting raged. With the aid of artillery and air support these attacks were beaten back and finally, in the early afternoon, the battalion was able to push out of the perimeter. Enemy bodies were found stacked like cordwood behind great ant hills and a large quantity of weapons and equipment was captured. The unit which had been cut off was recovered, and, as evening approached the battalion consolidated its position with another battalion that had reinforced it. A quiet night passed but in the morning when the men had their "mad minute fire"*, it prematurely triggered an enemy attack which was easily beaten off. With this last flurry of enemy activity the initial battle of the Ia Drang Valley was over. In the three days of heavy fighting the 1st Battalion had killed 634 NVA soldiers, taken six prisoners, and captured large stores of weapons, supplies, and equipment. The cost had been high, however. The battalion had lost seventy-nine troopers killed and 121 wounded. But despite these losses the "green" troopers of the 1st Cav had stood up to veteran NVA units and had come out on top.

Through the remainder of November the 3rd Brigade, and, later the 2nd Brigade, prowled amongst the peaks and valleys of the Ia Drang. Constant fighting raged as the calvary troopers found the elusive enemy. By the last week of November the NVA had enough. The remaining NVA troops retreated across the border into Cambodia. OPERATION SILVER BAYONET, as this action was code-named, eventually resulted in almost 1,800 enemy dead, against 240 U.S. fatalities, but while these numbers were impressive a large part of the enemy force was able to find sanctuary in Cambodia from where it posed a constant threat to the Central Highlands.

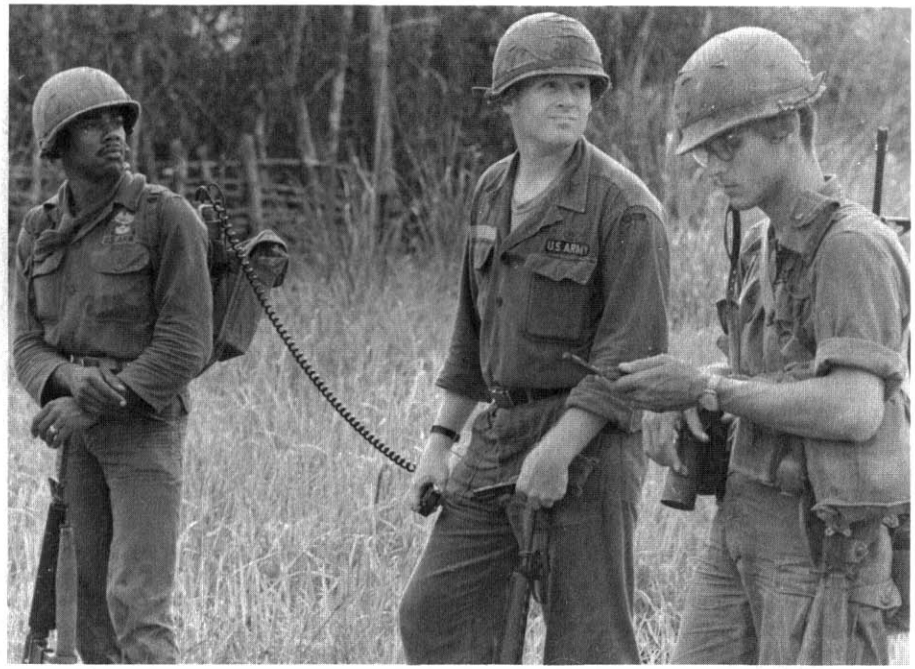
1966: The Tempo Increases

Following the stunning defeat of the communists in the Ia Drang Valley, US forces began to increase their offensive operations against the enemy in an effort to seize the initiative. By the beginning of 1966 the 3rd Brigade of the 25th Infantry Division had arrived in-country and set up its base at Pleiku. In January the brigade teamed up with the 173rd Airborne and an Australian battalion to sweep areas near the Cambodian border. Only limited contact was made although large quantities of weapons and ammunition were seized. In the months which followed the VC and NVA proved reluctant to engage U.S. troops. Perhaps the lessons of the Ia Drang were still being digested, but in the first half of 1966 there were few large scale attacks on American forces. Most of the search and destroy operations encountered little enemy oppositions as the communists evaded contact. The most significant operation of this period was OPERATION MASHER/WHITE WINGS/THANG PHONG II carried out by the 1st Cavalry Division along with Marine, ARVN and Republic of Korea (ROK) units from the end of January to the beginning of March. This action was the first large scale operation across corps boundries and resulted in over 2300 known enemy casualties.

As summer approached the action began to increase. In the Central Highlands the 25th Infantry and 101st Airborne carried out OPERATION PAUL REVERE and HAWTHORNE which resulted in over 1000 North Vietnamese dead. North of Saigon the 1st Infantry Division swept Binh Long province in search of the 9th VC Division during OPERATION El PASO II. This sweep lasted one and a half months and killed at least 850 Viet Cong. The summer also saw a major increase in U.S. ground troops with the arrival in August of advance elements of the 4th Infantry Division. These reinforcements raised the total U.S. troop level to over 350,000 men.

While this increase was occurring, the 196th Infantry Brigade began OPERATION ATTLEBORO, a search and destroy mission in War Zone C during mid-September. At first no significant contacts developed, but in October a major base camp was uncovered in the area. At the same time intelligence reports indicated that the 9th VC Division, which had been mauled by the 1st Infantry Division during El PASO II, had moved into the area from its sanctuaries in Cambodia. To aid the 196th in their search, elements of the 1st Infantry Division moved into War Zone C. On October 28th they made contact with a VC battalion and uncovered a number of base camps. By the first week of November it was apparent

**All troops sprayed the surrounding trees and brush for a minute with small arm fire to kill any enemy infiltrators or snipers who had infiltrated during the night.*



A platoon leader awaits orders to move out during a sweep near Bong Son. The early uniforms these men wear were hot and uncomfortable compared to the jungle fatigues which were designed to replace them. (US Army)

M-59 Baseball Grenade
M26A1 Fragmentation Grenade
M18 SMOKE VIOLET
M-185 Smoke Grenade
M-34 White Phosphorous Grenade
M-127 Signal Flare
SIGNAL ILLUMINATION, GROUND PARACHUTE, M127, WHITE STAR (HAND HELD)

(Above Left) A howitzer crew prepares to fire in support of the 1st Cavalry Division during OPERATION MASHER. They have yet to receive the lightweight jungle fatigues which were characterized by large pockets on both the shirt and pants. (US Army)

A trooper from the 101st Airborne lays down covering fire against enemy soldiers hidden in the treeline. He is carrying extra belts of machine gun ammunition and an M-72 Lightweight Anti-tank Weapon (LAW), a throwaway rocket launcher. (US Army)

A company from the 1st Infantry Division (The Big Red One) move down a road near Tay Ninh prior to a sweep in War Zone C. The closest soldier carries an M-60 machine gun and extra rounds of ammunition. (US Army)

(Above Left) An engineer from the 25th Infantry Division prepares explosives to destroy a communist bunker. Bunkers like these were hard to spot unless troops were very close to them. An M-79 grenade launcher is to the left of the engineer. (US Army)

that a very substantial enemy force was in the area. To back up units already in the field, brigades from the 4th and 25th Infantry Divisions, and the 173rd Airborne Brigade were brought in. This made ATTLEBORO the largest U.S. ground operation to date. Throughout November the fighting raged as the various units tried to encircle the elusive Viet Cong. By the end of November the communists had lost 2200 dead and 900 wounded in ground fighting and air strikes. What was left of the 9th Division slipped back over the border to Cambodia. Friendly losses amounted to 150 killed and 500 wounded.

As ATTLEBORO neared completion, OPERATION IRVING was initiated north of the coastal city of Qui Nhon. The purpose of this drive was to clear the populated coastal region of the Viet Cong's political and military structure. On D-Day, October 2nd, two brigades of the 1st Cavalry made helicopter assaults inside a pocket ringed by ARVN and Korean forces. Fierce fighting erupted around the village of Hoa Hoi and raged on for two days. When the village was finally captured, 233 of the enemy were dead or wounded, while American losses were 3 killed and 29 wounded. As the operation progressed the cavalry troopers constantly shifted positions by means of their helicopters. This kept the guerrillas off-balance and constantly on the move. By the time the sweep was terminated on October 24th over 680 VC or NVA had died and more then 740 had been captured. Total losses for the 1st Cav amounted to 20 killed in action. IRVING effectively eliminated the influence of the VC in this area, which had a lasting effect on the Pacification Program.

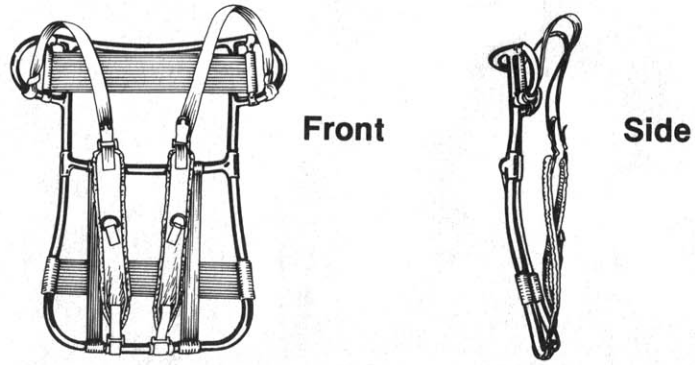
As 1966 drew to a close the newly arrived 4th Infantry Division, along with support from the 25th Infantry and 1st Cavalry Divisions, conducted PAUL REVERE IV, west of Pleiku. In sweeps along the Cambodian border contact with communist forces was almost a daily occurrence. Unfortunately, with their border sanctuaries so close, the enemy would make sudden attacks and then pull back into Cambodia since U.S. troops could not continue contact once they reached the border. Nevertheless in the six week operation which ended on December 30th the NVA lost over 1000 men while American losses were minimal. As the year closed, the 9th Infantry Division began arriving during mid-December and was deployed in III Corps, raising US troop strength to 385,000.

An engineer uses a mine detector to search for weapons and booby traps in a pile of rice stalks. The Viet Cong were masters at concealment and the placement of booby traps. (US Army)

Troops from the 25th Infantry stand security as members of their squad search for Viet Cong during OPERATION MAKAHA. Closest soldier has on jungle fatigues and wears a towel around his neck to soak up sweat. (US Army)

(Above Left) Members of the 101st Airborne, aboard a C-130 transport, relax as they fly to a new base during the spring of 1966. The soldier on the "Mule" wears a tiger striped camouflage uniform, a rather uncommon outfit for regular combat troops. (USAF)

Rucksack Frames

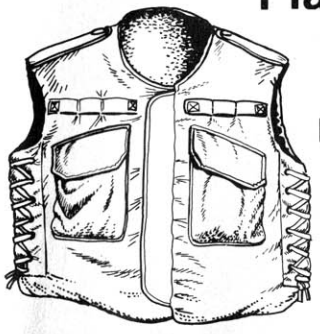


A good portion of a soldiers time is spent waiting. These men from the 173rd Airborne rest while they wait for helicopters to take them on an air assault. The tubular items are rucksack frames for ease in carrying equipment. (US Army)

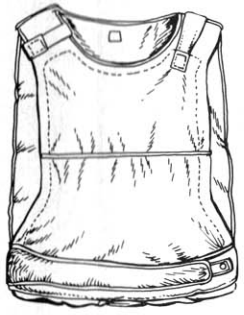
A radioman looks for signs of the Cong in an abandoned farm house in Phuoc Long province. The patch on the shoulder is that of the 25th Infantry Division, a Yellow lightning bolt on a Red crest. Such colorful insignias were soon discarded because they could betray a man's position in the Green foliage. They were replaced with low visibility patches that used only the colors Black and Green. (US Army)

A little humor at Nha Trang. As in past wars, American soldiers had a sense of humor and the Vietnam war was no different. (US Army)

Flak Jacket



Front



Back

A column of grunts from the 25th Infantry move along a road near the village of Cu Chi during OPERATION FORT SMITH. First man on the left wears a flak jacket designed to stop shrapnel and small arms fire, though leaving it unzipped opens up a large area of vital organs. He carries a M-18 smoke grenade on his belt. Man on the right is armed with an M-79 grenade launcher. (US Army)

Members of an infantry unit usually had to carry extra ammunition or mortar rounds when on operations. This soldier from the 173rd Airborne carries five mortar rounds in addition to his own field gear. In the hot, tropical climate of Vietnam this kind of load could very quickly sap the strength of the strongest man. (US Army)

(Above Right) A squad from the 27th Infantry, the "Wolfhounds", move through a rice paddy near Cu Chi. A wide variety of weapons are carried by this squad. The closest man has an M-16, the next an M-14, the next two M-79 grenade launchers, and the remainder carry M-14s. This unit was attached to the 25th Infantry Division. (US Army)

A Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP, pronounced lirp) from the 25th Infantry move in the shadows while on a patrol out of Cu Chi. Besides wearing the tiger striped camouflaged fatigues notice how the first two men's M-16s are also painted in camouflage colors. These uniforms proved very efficient in the dense jungles of Vietnam where light was let in through the numerous layers of leaves. (US Army)

The dense jungle conditions which US troops faced in Vietnam can be seen as troopers of the 1st Cav carry out OPERATION THAYER II near Qui Nhon. (US Army)

(Above Left) A soldier searches a haystack for possible hidden weapons or supplies. Often times the VC would booby trap such things with explosives or poisonous snakes to discourage such searches. The soldier is armed with a shotgun which was seldom seen in the field. He also carries both fragmentary and smoke grenades. (US Army)

A machinegun team fires on a suspected enemy position during a sweep by the 196th Light Infantry Brigade near Tay Ninh. The gunner is holding the M-60 with a special glove to protect his hand from the hot barrel. A sling was usually attached to the gun which ran over the shoulder to help in balancing the weapon.

Engineers of the 1st Infantry Division clear a road south of Quan Loi. The men wear flak jackets in case a mine is remotely triggered by the enemy. The third man back carries cord to explode any mines which are uncovered. The men are carrying a mixture of weapons including a shotgun. (US Army)

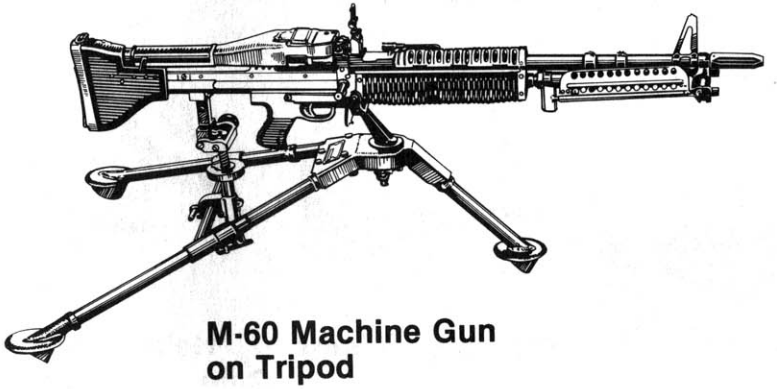
(Above Right) Even with constant sweeps the enemy proved adept at setting up mines. The jeep in the background detonated an anti-tank mine. The force of the explosion threw bodies nearly three hundred feet. (US Army)

M-60 Machine Gun
7.62 MM

While a comrade keeps watch two soldiers fill their canteens from a jungle stream. Thirst was a constant companion to troops as they prowled through the hot, steaming jungle. Note the extra belts of machinegun ammunition carried by the two men in the stream and the towel around the neck of the man keeping guard. (US Army)

In Vietnam the unexpected usually happened. In this instance a soldier from the 101st Airborne hastily moves his gear out of the way of an approaching herd of cattle. The lightweight rucksack frame saw widespread usage in Vietnam. (US Army)

(Above Left) A patrol from the 25th Infantry crosses a crude log bridge constructed by the North Vietnamese near the Cambodian border. Along with troops of the newly arrived 4th Infantry Division, they are taking part in "OPERATION PAUL REVERE IV". (US Army)



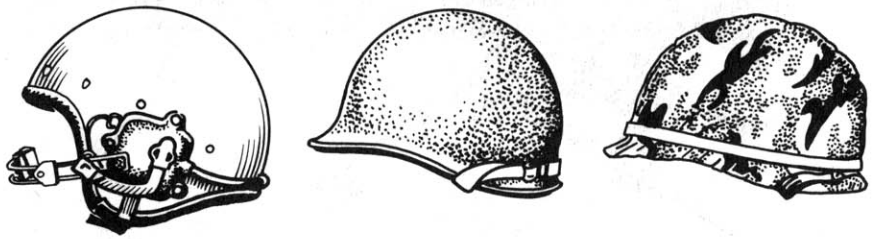
M-60 Machine Gun on Tripod

Because of the nature of guerrilla warfare, military police were often used to keep roads open or patrol roads between bases. These MPs from the 1st Cav move along a road northeast of An Khe. (US Army)

Elements of the 101st Airborne unload at Kontum in the Central Highlands. The guitar does not appear to be government issued equipment. Note the mixture of jungle fatigues and older utility uniforms among these troops. (US Army)

(Above Right) Paratroopers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade hitch a ride on an M-113. Note how all the men carry extra ammo belts for the squad's machine gun. (US Army)

Helmets



Tanker | Standard Helmet | Helmet with Camouflage Cover

Viet Cong suspects are interrogated by members of the 503rd Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, near the village of Vo Dat. M-113 in background has one of the early armored shields for the commander. (US Army)

Into The Iron Triangle

With the NVA stopped in their tracks by the influx of US combat troops, General Westmoreland began to launch counterattacks against the reeling enemy forces. In early 1967, he decided to launch an assault against the area north of Saigon between War Zone C ad D. Known as the "Iron Triangle", it was a jungle redoubt of dense forests, tangled underbrush, and hundreds of miles of tunnels and bunkers. The area had first served as a haven for the Viet Minh during the Japanese occupation and again during the French recolonization attempt. It had been further developed as the Viet Cong began their war against the Diem regime. In over twenty years a massive labyrinth of shelters, tunnels, hospitals, armories, command posts and fighting positions had evolved through the work of thousand of soldiers and laborers. Over the years the Iron Triangle had acquired a fearsome reputation and prior to the arrival of US troops, ARVN forces only entered the area in massive numbers.

The first attempt to destroy the redoubt by U.S. troops occurred in late 1965 when the 173rd Airborne Brigade, along with Australian and New Zealand troops, tried to crack it as part of their incursion into War Zone D. Unfortunately, little contact was made, and damage to the jungle fortress was minimal. After this failure, the VC and NVA rebuilt the few areas that the 173rd had destroyed and continued to mount attacks from the region, while at the same time using it as a rest and resupply point for field units.

To eliminate this dreaded citadel once and for all, Westmoreland launched OPERATION CEDAR FALLS, on 8 January 1967, with a surprise assault on the village of Ben Suc. This village, of approximately 6,000 people, was a fortified enemy supply and political center which the VC had controlled since 1964. In order to achieve surprise, a battalion of the 1st Infantry Division made a dawn helicopter landing in the middle of the village without supporting fire. The unit, commanded by Colonel Alexander Haig*, moved swiftly to secure the area around the town and kill or capture any VC who attempted to break out. While this was going on, the 25th Infantry Division and 196th Infantry Brigade moved into blocking positions along the western edge of the triangle, while to the east and north the 1st Infantry Division, the 173rd Airborne Brigade, and 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment blocked escape routes in those directions. Once these units had encircled the "Iron Triangle" they set about to destroy it. On the second day of the battle the 11th Armored Cav thrust into the region from the east while a battalion of the 1st Infantry and 173rd Airborne made an airmobile assault in the north. In a few short days the various units involved had crisscrossed the region and cut it into a number of isolated sections. But action was light as the equivalent of two enemy regiments had either scattered or fled the area without making a stand. Although the operation ran for three weeks, enemy losses amounted to a little over 700, while US losses numbered 72. The total number of troops committed was considerable, but the results were rather disappointing.

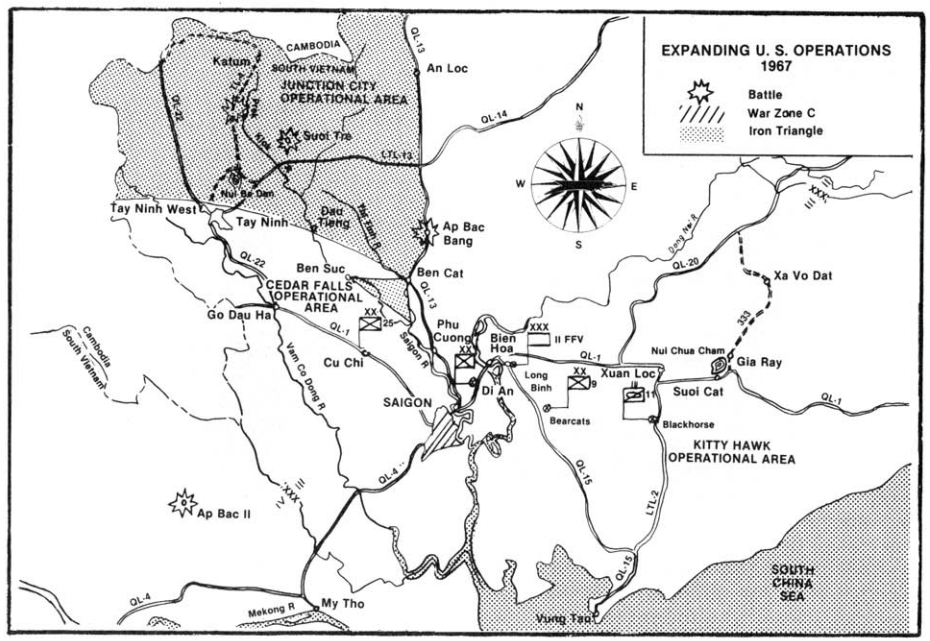
However, OPERATION CEDAR FALLS was not intended to kill enemy troops but rather to render the Iron Triangle unusable. Once the area had been secured, engineers moved into the region and began to alter the face of the fortress. The vast underground tunnel complex and chambers were searched by "tunnel rats". These were small statured G.I.s who volunteered to explore the vast network of passageways despite the dangers of booby traps, poison snakes, and an enemy who knew every turn and room in this subterranean world. These volunteers slowly cleared what they could with explosives which rendered many parts of the complex useless to the communists. Topside, the engineers cut and burned the tangled undergrowth and demolished any structures or bunkers they found. The entire population of the region was relocated so they could no longer aid the NVA or VC. By the end of January the job was done. The Iron Triangle lay covered in a pall of smoke, its surface bare of vegetation, and pitted with collapsed tunnels and destroyed bunkers. It seemed that the fortress would never again plague Allied forces. But even as the last troops withdrew, figures arose antlike from untouched tunnel complexes and began the job of rebuilding the redoubt. Like a mythical Phoenix, the Iron Triangle would rise from its ashes to plague the allied forces at a later date.

Colonel Alexander Haig became General Alexander Haig and eventually Secretary of State Alexander Haig.

Junction City — A Turning Point

Hard on the heels of CEDAR FALLS came OPERATION JUNCTION CITY, one of the largest ground actions US forces undertook during the entire war. Involved in this massive operation were units of the 1st, 4th, 9th, and 25th Infantry Divisions, the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, and the 196th Infantry and 173rd Airborne Brigades, along with ARVN and Australian troops. Over 45,000 men took part in this ground action which focused on War Zone C, a triangular shaped portion of jungle northwest of Saigon which abutted the Cambodian border. Intelligence officers believed that the 9th VC Division, 10,000 men strong, and several NVA battalions, plus numerous base camps, hospitals, supply depots, and weapons factories were located within this zone. Although this operation had been scheduled earlier, CEDAR FALLS had taken precedence over it when new intelligence information had been discovered about enemy units in the Iron Triangle. Upon the completion of CEDAR FALLS plans were finalized for encircling War Zone C and crushing any communist units in the area under the code name OPERATION JUNCTION CITY.

The portion of War Zone C which JUNCTION CITY took place was west of An Loc, north of Tay Ninh, and extended to roughly the Cambodian border. The overall plan called for allied units to form a horseshoe-shaped position around this area, blocking avenues of retreat while other forces drove up from the horseshoe's open southern end. Intially the operation was to have two phases but as the action progressed a third was added to take advantage of tactical conditions. In the first phase the 1st Infantry Division, augmented by troops from the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the 1st Cavalry Regiment, Task Force Wallace (ARVN), and the 9th Infantry Division, had the responsibility for the eastern and northern portions of the horseshoe. The responsibility for the northwestern and western sections of the perimeter was assigned to the 25th Infantry Division. To aid the division in this task, units from the 4th Infantry Division, the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, and Task Force Alpha (Vietnamese Marines) were allocated to its commander. In the south the open end of the horseshoe would be sealed by a brigade from the 25th Infantry and elements of the 11th Armored Cavalry. These units also had the job of



driving northward into the horseshoe and forcing the enemy against the blocking forces, a tactic labeled the "hammer and anvil".

The operation began on 22 February when elements of the 1st Infantry made a series of airmobile assaults near the Cambodian border. Shortly afterwards a battalion of the 173rd Airborne made the only parachute assault of the war when it jumped near the village of Katum on the eastern side of the horseshoe. Within a short time the battalion had achieved its objectives with few casualties and began receiving heavy equipment drops. The other units involved in the operation then commenced moving into positions around the horseshoe, while the "hammer" units from the south began their northward drive. By day's end all units were in place or moving into place. But little enemy resistance was encountered. Only twice during this phase, on 28 February and 10 March near Prek Klok, would there be any substantial contact with the communists. During the first battle a battalion of the 9th VC division attacked a company from the 1st Infantry which was sweeping the jungle south of Prek Klok. In the ensuing fight portions of the company were cut off. To relieve them both, air and artillery support, along with additional reinforcements were called in. By the end of the day the company had been extracted but it suffered over fifty dead or wounded. The enemy losses totalled nearly two hundred, many of them killed by air and artillery strikes. Two weeks later two other battalions from the 9th VC staged an attack on an artillery fire base located at Prek Klok. At the base were two artillery batteries, a mechanized infantry battalion*, and some engineers. Shortly after sundown on 10 March, the VC began to bombard the position with mortars, rockets and recoilless rifle fire. Despite heavy US return fire from mortars, artillery, and from the M-113s, the enemy launched a major assault against the eastern perimeter and diversionary probes at other points. For over an hour hard fighting ensued, with the defenders calling in air, artillery, and gunship support. The communists were able to destroy a number of M-113s but did not breach the perimeter. Sporadic fire continued through the night but after the initial attack the VC withdrew. Over 200 VC were killed in this battle while the US losses were 3 killed and 38 wounded. This battle marked the last significant contact of phase one which ended a week after, on 17 March.

During the second phase of JUNCTION CITY the horseshoe was gradually tightened. As the area the enemy had to maneuver in decreased, contact increased. As a result, the fighting during this phase was far more intense, particularly in the first few days of the new attack. On March 19th, a battalion from the 4th Infantry Division suffered numerous casualties near Suoi Tre when the VC detonated five remote controlled land mines during an airmobile assault. These destroyed or damaged 9 helicopters and killed or wounded 48 soldiers. The next day, troops from the 273rd VC Regiment made a human wave attack against a fire support base near Ap Bau Bang which contained one artillery battery and a armored cavalry troop. The VC were able to penetrate the perimeter at several places after an intense bombardment. In some cases the enemy swarmed over tanks and APCs, and hand-to-hand fighting took place. Eventually, with air strikes, artillery support, fire from gunships, and relief forces the enemy was forced back with over 200 killed while US dead were 3.

The next night, at Fire Base Gold, near Suoi Tre, the 272nd VC Regiment made a desperate assault against the one infantry and two artillery battalions stationed there. In the early morning hours the communists began smothering the base with mortar, rocket, and recoilless rifle fire. Over 1000 rounds impacted on the camp before the VC began their assault. In hard fighting they broke through the eastern perimeter at a number of points and forced the soldiers back. Despite support fire the Americans were unable to drive the enemy back, even when they fired their own artillery at point blank range. The fighting intensified until the VC were within hand grenade range of the command post. Fortunately, a mechanized and armored battalion were able to break through at this critical moment. As the tanks and APCs broke through the encircling VC troops, the enemy swarmed over the vehicles but were thrown off in hand-to-hand combat. With these welcome reinforcements the base defenders rallied and eventually threw the VC back. Losses were staggering. Over 600 enemy dead lay on the field while US losses were 31 killed and 109 wounded. It was an outstanding victory achieved by the sheer courage and tenacity of the American soldier who fought there.

The last major battle of the second phase took place at Ap Gu near the Cambodian border. Two battalions from the 1st Infantry Division staged an airmobile assault into the area on 30 March, initially encountering no opposition. The next day a platoon on patrol was ambushed, and, as a relief company went to its aid, the VC sprang an ambush with a full battalion from the 271st VC Regiment. Eventually, another company was needed to rescue the two pinned down units. As the units withdrew into night defensive positions the two battalion commanders prepared for a possible night attack. Their instincts proved correct. In the early morning hours of 1 April, three enemy battalions from the 271st VC Regiment attacked the perimeter of the battalion commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Haig. Other VC units made diversionary attacks on the second battalion and on nearby artillery fire bases. In savage fighting the communists were able to force back one company, but reinforcements moved in and stabilized the situation. By daylight the defenders were able to rally, and with the aid of air and artillery support, drove the VC back into the jungle. Though other U.S. units tried to encircle the retreating enemy, the elusive Cong slipped away, but not before leaving behind 500 dead on the battlefield. The two battalions of US Infantry suffered 17 killed and 102 wounded during the hour long battle. However, as further patrols probed the surrounding jungle an additional 100 enemy dead were found. These losses effectively crippled the enemy regiment, and it would be months before it was ready for combat again.

The final phase of JUNCTION CITY began on 16 April, but by this time there were few enemy troops left in the small area not yet searched. Thus, only scattered resistance was encountered by US and allied forces, and no significant contacts resulted. In mid-May the US Command terminated the operation because of lack of contact and the need to shift ground forces to counteract enemy probes in other sectors. The final results of JUNCTION CITY were impressive. Nearly 3,000 troops from the 9th VC Division had been killed while over 200 had been captured or rallied to the allied side. In addition, nearly 100 base camps were destroyed, and large amounts of weapons, ammunition and supplies had been seized. But this had not been achieved without cost. American personnel losses amounted to 282 killed and 1,576 wounded, along with material losses in armor, artillery, and helicopters. War Zone C was not completely destroyed. Though severely damaged it would again be rebuilt from the ashes and continue to be a thorn in the side of the US and ARVN forces. But, the VC had learned that even in such a jungle redoubt as this they were not safe from the ever increasing ground power of US forces.

Equipped with M-113 Armored Personnel Carriers.

A machinegun team from the 173rd Airborne moves into position during OPERATION CEDAR FALLS. Note how the gunner has positioned his pistol for the protection of a rather delicate area, and the use of a sling to help in carrying the M-60. (US Army)

Company commanders from the 3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry, discuss a tunnel complex which their troops have just uncovered during CEDAR FALLS. Note the baggy pockets of the jungle fatigues and M59 baseball grenade carried by the pointing officer. These did not see widespread usage until later in the war when they began replacing the old "pineapple grenades" which ARVN used extensivley. (US Army)

Soldiers watch as supplies and heavy equipment are dropped during OPERATION JUNCTION CITY. This was the only large scale airborne assault mounted by American forces during the war. (USAF)

Men from the 1st Infantry Division hitch a ride on an M-48 tank from the 4th Cavalry during JUNCTION CITY. This operation took place in War Zone "C" during the early months of 1967. (US Army)

A machinegunner from the 35th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, struggles up a steep hillside near Phu Cat. He carries a variety of equipment including an entrenching tool, machete or K bar, extra bandoliers of ammunition, and a climbing rope. (US Army)

Careful movement through tangled vegetation reduced the chances of setting off booby traps. Members of the 9th Infantry Division slowly move through a row of dense bushes near Dong Tam in the Mekong Delta. This unit was the first large US ground force to be sent into the Delta. (US Army)

These soldiers from the 196th Light Infantry Brigade move through a flooded area near their base camp at Chu Lai. The lack of extra gear indicates that this is a very local patrol which will return home before night. (US Army)

A soldier checks the magazine of his M-16 to be sure it has no dirt or rust which might cause it to jam. Though a good weapon, the M-16 needed constant cleaning to prevent jamming. The standard magazine held twenty rounds but most troops only put in eighteen so as not to weaken the magazine spring. If this happened the last round or two would not seat properly. (U.S. Army)

(Above Left) Dog handlers from the 199th Infantry Brigade conduct a search during a sweep north of Saigon. Police dogs were helpful in locating weapons and ammunition, but they were unable to cope with the extremely hot climate, which restricted their usage except for local operations. (US Army)

A squad leader from the 1st Cav prepares to call his company commander during OPERATION MALHEUR in Quang Nai provence. The radio telephone operator (RTO) was a vital link in the communications setup and a prime target for enemy snipers. RTO's suffered a high percentage of casualties during the initial stages of a battle or firefight. (US Army)

An RTO plods through a marsh in the Mekong delta near Rach Kien. These conditions were typical of the area and resulted in most operations being limited to less than a week. This allowed the troops to dry out and cut down on foot and skin infections which could put troops out of action as sure as a bullet wound. (US Army)

(Above Right) Men of the 1st Cav move along a jungle stream during a search and destroy mission in the An Lao valley. Because of the dense jungle, streams were often the easiest way to move. Unfortunately the enemy often laid booby traps or ambushes along them because of this constant use by American troops. (US Army)

A platoon leader calls a halt with hand signals while a detail goes forward to check out a suspicious area. Note the extra smoke grenades on the back of the radio and the compass on the pocket of the platoon leader. (US Army)

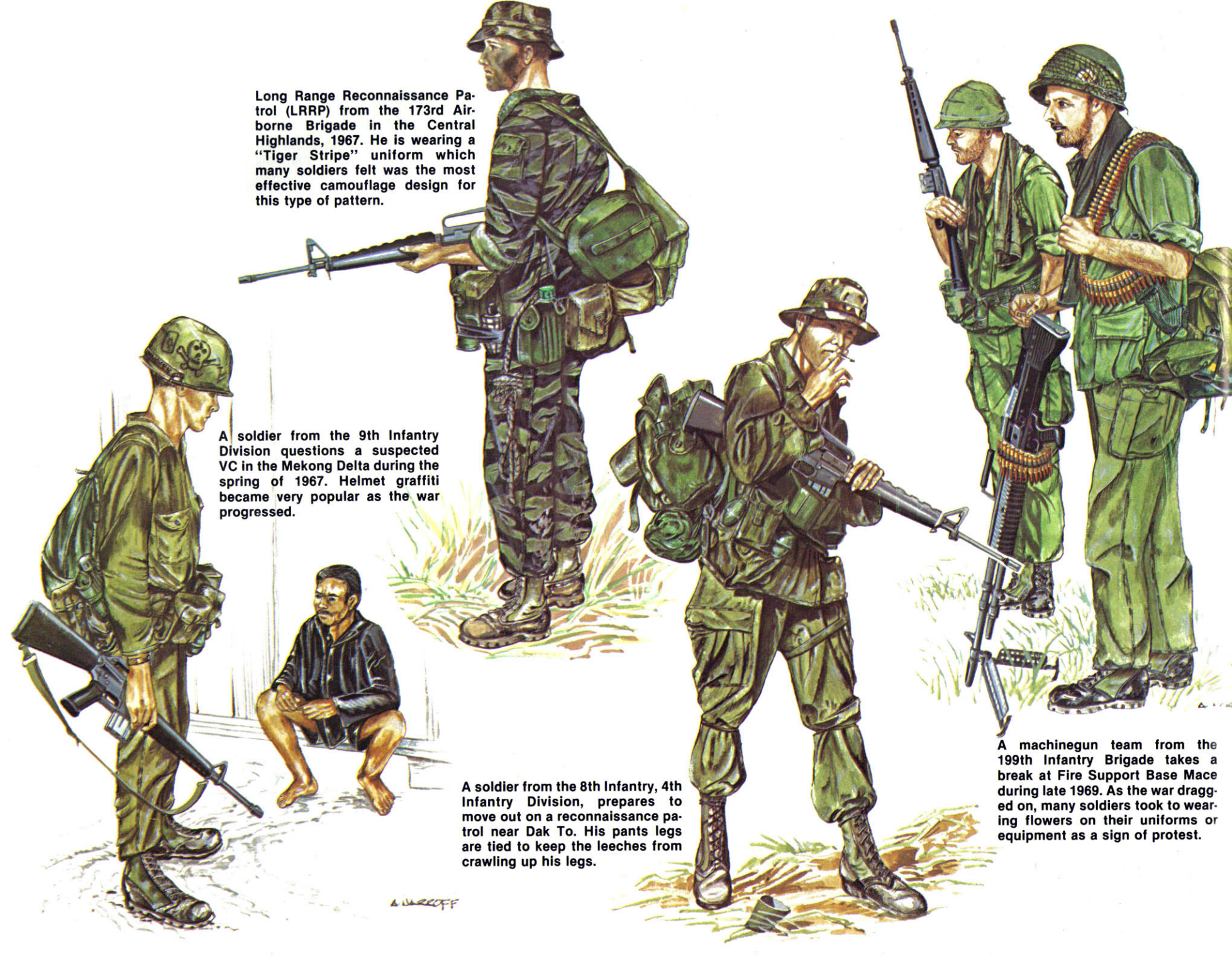
An M-79 grenadier from the 2nd Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, loads his M-79 grenade launcher during an engagement with enemy forces during August of 1965 near Bien Hoa. This was one of the first operations against the enemy by U.S. forces in the war.

A sergeant from the 199th Infantry Brigade searches a haystack near the village of Binh Chanh in 1967. He is carrying an M-79 grenade launcher and wears a pith helmet.

A paratrooper from the 173rd Airborne Brigade prior to the only parachute assault of the Vietnam War by a regular army unit. This took place during operation JUNCTION CITY in late February of 1967.

A soldier equipped with an M-72 LAW taking a break during a sweep near An Khe in December of 1965. He is wearing a poncho to keep out the rain.

A sergeant from the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, prepares to blow an abandoned V.C. bunker during operation VAN BUREN in January of 1966. Camouflage uniforms were not common among most field units during this stage of the war.



Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) from the 173rd Airborne Brigade in the Central Highlands, 1967. He is wearing a "Tiger Stripe" uniform which many soldiers felt was the most effective camouflage design for this type of pattern.

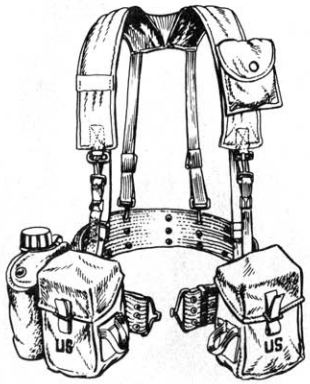
A soldier from the 9th Infantry Division questions a suspected VC in the Mekong Delta during the spring of 1967. Helmet graffiti became very popular as the war progressed.

A soldier from the 8th Infantry, 4th Infantry Division, prepares to move out on a reconnaissance patrol near Dak To. His pants legs are tied to keep the leeches from crawling up his legs.

A machinegun team from the 199th Infantry Brigade takes a break at Fire Support Base Mace during late 1969. As the war dragged on, many soldiers took to wearing flowers on their uniforms or equipment as a sign of protest.

Members of the 9th Infantry Division, attached to the Riverine force ford a stream during a search and destroy mission in the delta. Such watercourses as these crisscrossed the region and made movement extremely difficult. (US Army)

(Above Right) A machinegunner passes his M-60 to an RTO who is on a little more solid ground, in the hope that without the extra weight he can extract himself from the glue-like mud he is bogged down in. Notice how both men use the band on their helmets to hold cigarettes and other items which they wish to keep dry and have easy access. (US Army)



Harness

Canteen

A patrol from the 1st Infantry Division moves into the brush near their base during OPERATION BILLINGS in Phuoc Long province. The use of camouflage hats and scarves is unusual with regular jungle fatigues. The closest man carries a CAR-15, a shortened version of the M-16, with a telescopic stock. (US Army)

On The Offensive

Following JUNCTION CITY, US troops began a series of operations designed to root out hard core VC and NVA units throughout Vietnam. In response to increased enemy activity in I Corps elements of the 25th Infantry, 101st Airborne, and 196th Brigade relocated to the area to help the hard pressed marines. These units came under the control of Task Force Oregon, a provisional division size organization which later became the Americal Division. While this shift occurred, additional US troops arrived in-country to form the Mobile Riverine Force (MRF) in the Mekong Delta, the first large scale deployment of American forces to this area. Because of the vast system of waterways in this region the troops, from the 9th Infantry Division, were based on shallow drafted barracks ships and moved into battle aboard specially modified landing craft. Other landing craft were fitted with heavier armament, helipads, and special communications to provide support in the narrow channels and swamps which characterized the region. In March the MRF began a series of operations to clear the VC from the Rung Sat, a dense mangrove swamp southeast of Saigon. These initial operations proved successful and vindicated the riverine concept. By the middle of the summer the entire complement of troops and ships were ready for full scale operations, and the force set up its headquarters at Don Tam near the district capital of My Tho. From here the unit carried out between six and eight search and destroy mission per month.

Throughout the summer and fall of 1967 US troops were constantly on the move, carrying out numerous sweeps against suspected communist troop concentrations. Many of these were non-productive since the enemy rarely fought unless he had a decided advantage. Instead, the guerrillas relied on ambushes, booby traps, and sniper fire to counter the much stronger US units. However, some operations were able to pin the communists down, and when this occurred the enemy lost heavily. In September Task Force Oregon accounted for nearly 2000 VC or NVA dead during OPERATION WHEELER in I Corps. Further south, OPERATIONS BOLLING and SHENANDOAH II, conducted by the 1st Cavalry Division, the 173rd Airborne Brigade, and the 1st Infantry Division cost the communists 1600 casualties. In the Mekong Delta the MRF carried out CORONADO V which netted over 300 guerrilla dead. Operations such as these pushed the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese away from the major population centers, but as the enemy withdrew toward their border sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos they received reinforcements and supplies which enabled them to rebuild their shattered formations. Within a relatively short time these same units were operating again.

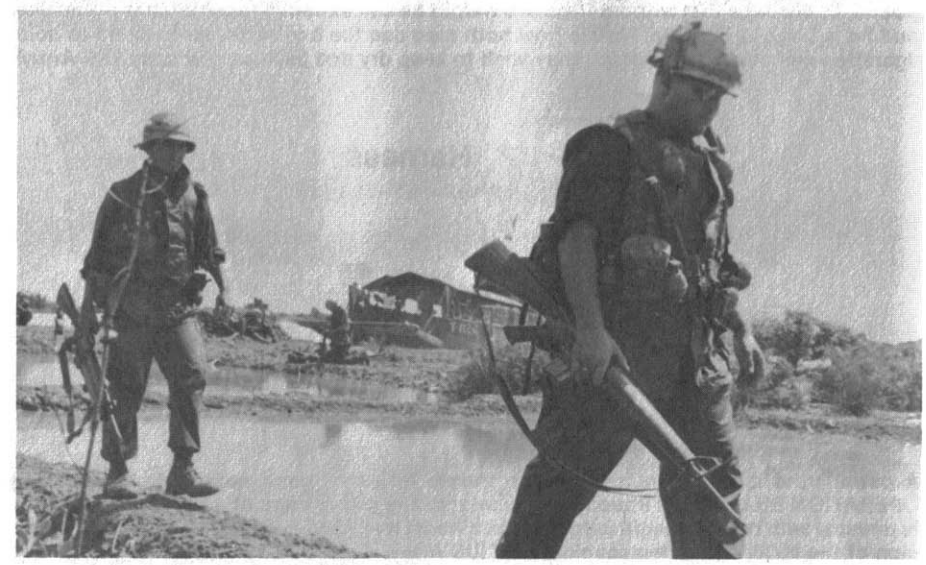
The Border Battles: Dak To

In the late fall of 1967 three engagements took place along the Vietnamese-Laotion-Cambodian borders which became collectively known as the Border Battles. The first one involved elements of an ARVN battalion near Song Be in Phuoc Long Province, northeast of Saigon. In the last week of October a NVA regiment tried to wrestle the town from the Vietnamese troops but were beaten back with over a hundred dead and scores of wounded. A few days later, on 29 October, another NVA regiment attempted to take the town of Loc Ninh in the province of Binh Long, immediately to the west of Song Be. Unlike Song Be, Loc Ninh was defended by local troops, and the NVA felt the town would fall easily. Much to their surprise these locals not only held out but inflicted serious losses on the NVA troops until being reinforced by two ARVN companies.

To forestall further NVA attacks in this area a brigade of the 1st Infantry Division joined with ARVN troops in a sweep of the countryside. As part of SHENANDOAH II, this operation was designed to clear the enemy out of the rubber plantations around Loc Ninh. In the long rows of evenly spaced rubber trees the NVA soldiers had wide, unobstructed fields of fire which gave them a definite advantage over the assaulting US and ARVN troops. However, with the judicious use of artillery, aircraft, and armor, the tables were

Flamethrowers were not used extensively in Vietnam because of their weight and a scarcity of suitable targets. Here a member of the 1st Cav uses one to clear out a cave in the An Lao valley. Gas mask protects him from the smoke and noxious fumes given off by the weapon. (US Army)

These troops have just disembarked from the landing craft in the background and are moving along the top of a paddy dike. The water level in this area is right at the surface as evidenced by the river in the background. Movement along the tops of dikes like this made it easy for the enemy to slow down the advance with a single machinegun or sniper. (US Army)



turned on the enemy and almost a thousand NVA soldiers perished in the vicious fighting. Unfortunately, not all the fighting was so one sided. Just south of Loc Ninh near where the Iron Triangle and War Zone C merge, a battalion from the 1st Infantry ran into one of the most devastating ambushes American forces encountered in the war. While on patrol the battalion walked into a carefully laid trap set up by an entire NVA regiment. Without warning the battalion was hit from all sides by intense small arms and mortar fire. In this initial attack, a large number of officers were killed, including the battalion commander and a number of his staff. The unit was able to dig in and resist further attacks until help arrived. Over a hundred US soldiers were killed or wounded. The NVA regiment managed to slip away with minimal losses before reinforcements could move to block its escape.

However these initial battles were but a prelude to the bloodiest fighting since the Ia Drang valley campaign. Dak To was a small Green Beret outpost nestled in a river valley near the junction of the Cambodian-Laotion border with Vietnam. It sat along Highway 14, the main north-south road in the Central Highlands. In addition it was also astride Route 512 which served as a major Viet Cong and NVA infiltration line into the highlands area. In late October fragmentary intelligence reports indicated that the NVA high command was moving the reinforced 1st NVA division toward the town. To forestall any attempt by the enemy in this direction the 4th Infantry Division mounted operation MACARTHUR in the vicinity of Dak To. Almost immediately an NVA sergeant defected to US forces with detailed plans of the enemies intentions. Though at first skeptical US officers were finally able to confirm the soldiers story which proved surprisingly accurate. The NVA plan called for two regiments, the 32nd and 66th, to attack Dak To from the south and southeast, while another, the 24th, would assault the town from the northeast. The remaining regiment, the 174th would remain in reserve. To counter this plan, the 4th Infantry moved a number of battalions, including one from the 173rd Airborne Brigade into blocking positions around Dak To along the main NVA attack route. Once these units were in position they began to probe the surrounding hills in search of the enemy. Almost immediately the battalion in the south ran into heavy enemy resistance. To counter this, massive air strikes, including B-52s, and artillery fire were called in on the NVA position. More battalions were airlifted in to join the vicious battle. The bloody fighting see-sawed back and forth until mid-November when the NVA commander finally realized his forces were no match for the American troops with their supporting fire. In an attempt to extricate his shattered regiments the enemy committed the reserve regiment to cover a retreat to the southwest where US forces had been helicoptered into blocking positions.

The 174th NVA regiment chose to make a stand on Hill 875, so named for its height above sea level. In a short time the enemy had dug a series of deep interconnecting bunkers on the steep, wooded slopes. These positions were discovered by a patrol from a battalion of the 173rd Airborne Brigade. While supporting fire hit the bunker complex the battalion began advancing up the rugged slope. Despite support fire the battalion was hit with such intense and accurate defensive fire that it was pinned down, and suffered very heavy casualties. In an attempt to relieve the battalion another unit was brought in by helicopter but fierce ground fire drove them off. Eventually, a combination of air and artillery support suppressed the ground fire so that the battalion could relieve its sister unit. For four days these two battalions from the 173rd, later joined by another battalion from the 4th Infantry Division, fought a desperate battle with the 174th for control of the rocky outcrop. At times the combat was so close that no support fire could be delivered. Finally, the NVA could no longer hold out and the weary US troops took the hilltop on Thanksgiving Day. The capture of Hill 875 marked the end of the "Border Battles". In the fighting around Dak To the four NVA regiments lost over 1600 men killed plus a large number who were seriously wounded. Nearly 300 American soldiers also perished in the bitter fighting, but the enemy drive to capture this vital area was thwarted.

As this battle in the Central Highlands ended, more reinforcements continued to flow into Vietnam. The major ground units contained in this deployment was the 101st Airborne Division, the famous "Screaming Eagles". Their arrival increased overall US troop strength to over 485,000 men. This number raised the total American strength to a level greater than that used in the Korean War. Events in 1968 would soon show that even more men would be needed if victory was to be achieved.

During the battle around Dak To the fighting at Hill 875 was as violent as any in the war. Members of the 173rd Airborne Brigade crouch down in a shell crater as mortar fire drops around them. Closest man is armed with a CAR-15 (US Army)

Troopers from the 173rd keep low as enemy fire whistles overhead. In the battle for Hill 875 the unit performed so gallantly that they received a Presidential Unit Citation. The entrenched NVA regiment suffered over 800 men killed in the battle for the hill that was finally captured on Thanksgiving Day. (US Army)

1968-A Year Of Decision

By the end of 1967 communist forces throughout Vietnam were in disarray. Many of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units had been severely mauled in combat with US forces and most of their base camps had been destroyed. Only in I Corps did the US face a serious military challenge. In the far northwestern corner of I Corps, two full NVA divisions surrounded a marine regiment at Khe Sanh in a possible attempt to inflict a Dien Bien Phu-type of defeat on the Americans. To counter this threat elements from the 1st Cav and the newly arrived 101st Airborne Division were sent to reinforce Khe Sanh.

But while the enemy made it appear they were focusing their attention on this isolated position, a far more ambitious plan was about to be unveiled. By this stage in the war the communists had realized that they could not militarily defeat US forces. However, they sensed that if they could achieve a major propaganda victory the US public, becoming increasingly weary of the war, might clamor for a political solution. Thus, the communist high command decided to unleash a series of suicidal attacks against military and civilian targets. They hoped that these attacks would spark a general uprising of ARVN troops and civilians who would join them in attacks against US forces. Preparations for this assault took place while the battle for Khe Sanh was shaping up. Enemy troops infiltrated into the cities and stockpiled weapons in preparation for the attack. To achieve maximum surprise the communists decided to launch this offensive during the traditional Tet cease-fire* when the vigilance of US and ARVN forces was at its lowest. On the morning of 31 January, the enemy unleashed their long planned attack. Rockets slammed into every major South Vietnamese city, while troops already in position attempted to seize strategic points such as police stations, armories, and airstrips. Outside the cities other units attempted to break through allied lines to link up with guerrillas already in the cities. Perhaps the least significant military effort was the attempt by a small group of infiltrators to storm the US Embassy in Saigon. Yet this got massive coverage in the United States press, press coverage far out of proportion to its significance.

As the first news of the Saigon Embassy attack filtered into the United States, ARVN troops were already moving to counter the enemy assaults. Savage street fighting occurred in Saigon and Hue as allied soldiers fought to root out the entrenched enemy. As the military tide turned against them, the VC and NVA infiltrators carried out a series of mass executions of civilians. In Hue alone over 5000 people were brutally tortured and murdered before the communists were driven out of the city.

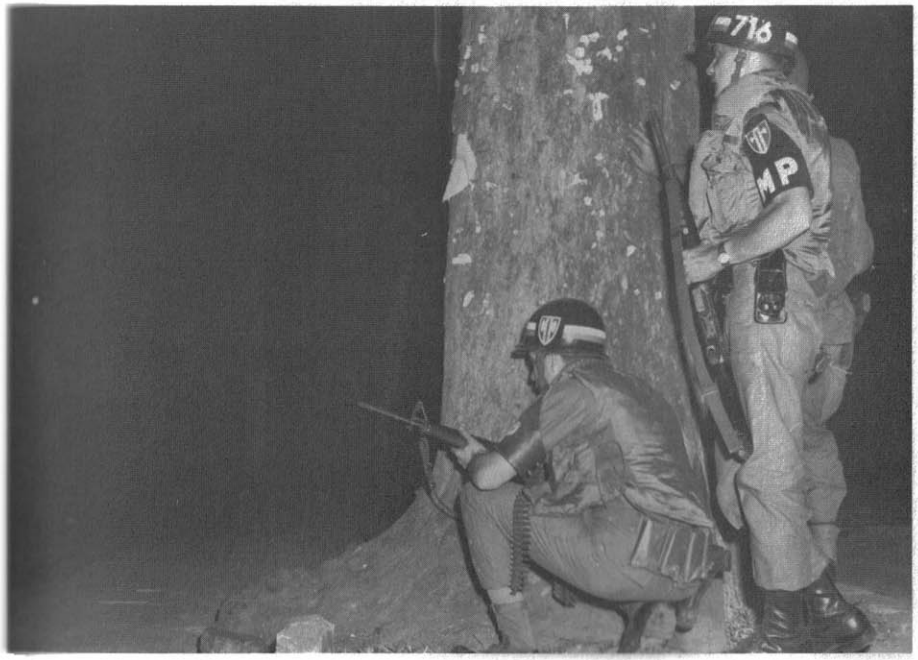
In the month of fighting which followed the attack, nearly 1000 American soldiers died while over 4,500 were wounded. But the enemy losses were far in excess of this. Roughly 20,000 VC and NVA died during this period, while 30-40,000 were wounded. And, except for the citadel in Hue they were unable to hold any key points for a prolonged period of time. Militarily this attack was a disaster, yet thanks to the grossly distorted media coverage of it in the press, the communists achieved a propaganda victory without parallel in modern history. In the United States the anti-war movement made political capital of the battle, and more and more people began to question US involvement in the war. One month after the Tet Offensive ended, President Johnson announced he would not run for another term, and began cutting back the aerial bombardment of North Vietnam . What the communist forces could not win on the battlefield they were given by the American press.

However, while the communists were achieving this massive propaganda victory in the United States, their forces in Vietnam were suffering one reversal after another. Once the initial onslaught was over, US and ARVN forces counterattacked the decimated enemy formations. Near Saigon elements of the 1st, 9th, and 25th Infantry Divisions, supported by the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment and ARVN units, swept the area surrounding the capital in OPERATION QUYET THANG. By the beginning of April over 2600 guerrillas had been killed. In addition large numbers of arms caches were also seized. While this operation was going on, the 1st Cavalry Division and units of the 3rd Marine Division began OPERATION PEGASUS, to relieve the surrounded marines at Khe Sanh. Using helicopters the airborne soldiers leapfrogged over the NVA position to cut off their retreat to Laos. As the marines pushed to Khe Sanh numerous enemy units were caught in the squeeze. During the two week operation the North Vietnamese lost over 1000 men. The official relief of the base came on 8 April, although PEGASUS was not officially terminated until 15 April.

Tet is something like a combination of Christmas and New Years to the Vietnamese.

On the eve of the TET offensive US forces in the field were unaware of what the enemy had in store for the cities throughout Vietnam. These members of the 199th Infantry Brigade look over a map of the area near Bien Hoa during a sweep of the area. Soldier on the right wears one of the low visibility patches which replaced the earlier more colorful ones. (US Army)

Air bases were a prime target during the TET offensive. This bunker at Tan Son Nhut was captured early in the attack by the Viet Cong but a combination of American infantry, air force police, and ARVN tanks recaptured it. (USAF)



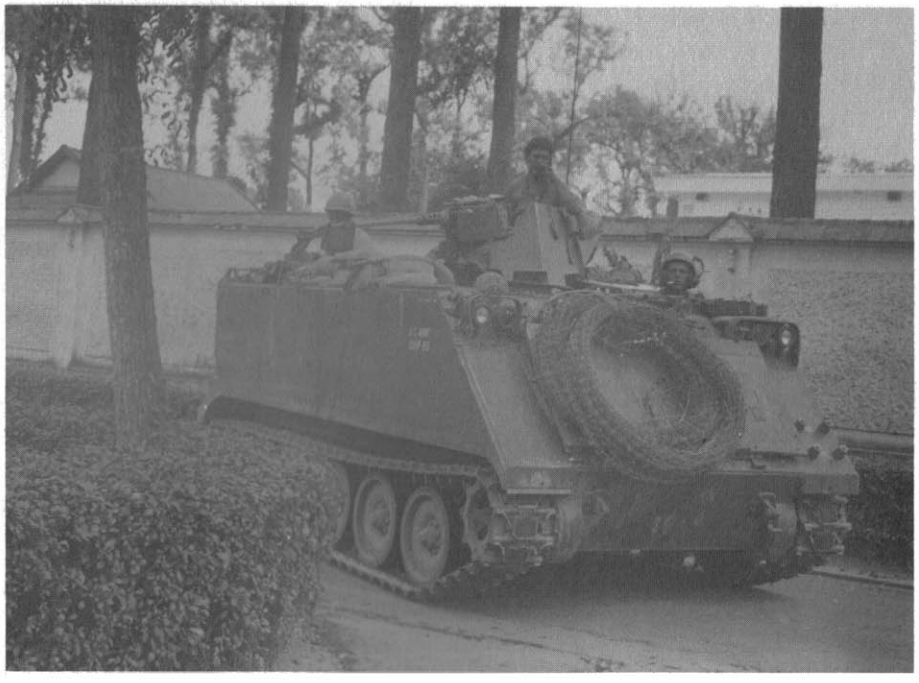
Four days later the 1st Cav, 101st Airborne, and elements of the 196th Infantry Brigade began OPERATION DELAWARE. This drive was aimed at the A Shau Valley, a communist stronghold southwest of Hue which contained numerous supply depots, base camps, and infiltration routes from Laos. The initial attack involved four helicopter assault into the valley by the 1st Cav while other US and ARVN units drove from the east on the ground. The helicopters were greeted by intense ground fire but were able to land their troops. Following the initial assault the cavalry troops began to fan out in the valley. As the operation progressed, enemy resistance increased. Throughout the remainder of April communist troops fought savagely as they were forced back by US troops. By the end of the month their resistance was broken. Over 850 NVA soldiers died in the month long campaign which ended in mid-May. Huge quantities of arms and supplies that had been painstakingly stockpiled over a two year period were destroyed. These losses in men and material effectively crippled the communists in the region for the remainder of 1968.

As April turned into May the United States and Hanoi announced they were ready to sit down and discuss peace proposals in Paris. One day after this news broke, communists forces launched a series of suicidal attacks across South Vietnam. However, this time surprise was not on their side, and despite some bitter fighting, the attacks were repulsed with huge losses. Because of these heavy losses of men and material this was the last major attack carried out by the communists during 1968. Throughout the remainder of the year the communists had to content themselves with long range rocket and mortar attacks against allied bases and Vietnamese civilian population centers. To counter these terror tactics, the allies carried out numerous sweeps around the cities to destroy arms caches and root out the remaining enemy soldiers. By fall these rocket attacks had subsided considerably and US and ARVN troops were able to switch their sweeps away from the cities and back into the countryside. The depleted enemy forces were sought out and brought to bay whenever possible. Unwilling to stand and fight, those units which were able, fled across the border into sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos to rest and regroup. By the year's end, few full strength communist formations remained inside Vietnam. What was left consisted mostly of basically local guerrillas who were incapable of seriously hampering US and Vietnamese forces.

(Above Right) This MP jeep was ambushed as it responded to a call for help on the night of the initial enemy attack. All the occupants were killed. (US Army)

(Above Left)The enemy scored a tremendous propaganda victory when a sapper team managed to penetrate the US Embassy compound in Saigon on the first night of the attack. Two MPs from the 716th MP battalion keep a sharp lookout for any VC activity around the embassy while other troops root out the sappers inside. The soldier on the left wears standard jungle boots while the one on the right wears the all leather combat boots. The upper portion of the jungle boot was made of a Green synthetic material. (US Army)

Members of the 1st Infantry Division search a cemetery on the outskirts of Saigon a few days after the start of TET. Prior to the offensive the VC staged a number of fake funerals, burying coffins filled with weapons. These weapons were retrieved just before the attack. (US Army)



A weary machinegunner from the 199th Infantry Brigade surveys the devastation in Cholon, the Chinese quarter of Saigon, after a week of severe fighting. This section of Saigon was almost totally destroyed by a combination of street fighting, artillery bombardment, and air strikes. When the author went through this section four years later, it still bore heavy marks of the vicious fighting. (US Army)

(Above Right) An M-113 from the 25th Infantry Division supports troops of the 1st Infantry Division near a cemetery in Saigon. The vehicle is fitted with an early style armored shield on the commanders hatch and carries sandbags on the deck for additional protection from small arms fire. (US Army)

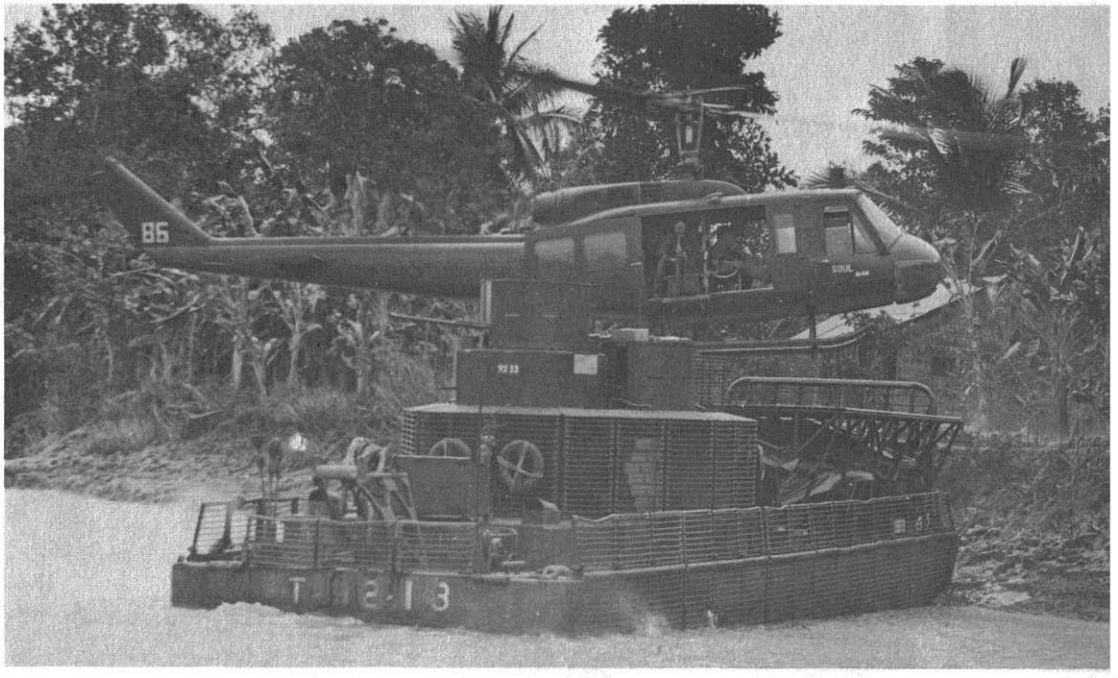
While most of the fighting during TET took place in the cities, the war still went on in the countryside. A soldier from the Americal Division watches a group of prisoners file past the body of a Viet Cong killed during a sweep through the village. (U.S. Army)

The shoulder insignia is that of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, while the winged insignia on the helmets is from the 82nd Airborne. These troops have just arrived in-country and are awaiting a flight to their new base. (US Army)

Above Right) A soldier from the 1st Cav, carrying an M-72 LAW on his back, watches intently as an engineer prepares to rig a booby trap for demolition. One problem with the M-72 LAW carried by the soldier was its inability to function if moisture got inside the firing mechanism. A fair percentage of them failed because of this problem. (US Army)

M-79 Grenade Launcher

A grenadier from the 9th Infantry Division prepares to fire a grenade at a suspected enemy position in a tree line. The M-79 covered the area between the longest distance of the handthrown grenade and the shortest distance of the mortar. As such it was an excellent infantry weapon. (US Army)

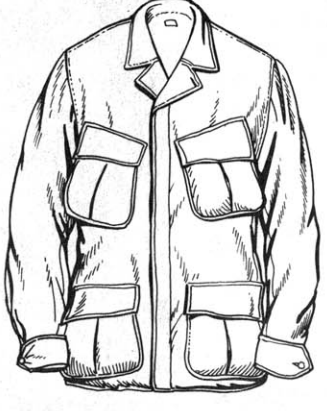


The Riverine forces evolved their own tactics to compensate for the vast tracts of water they had to operate over. This landing craft has been fitted with a special deck to allow helicopters to land on it. These craft were often used as makeshift hospitals until wounded could be flown to better facilities. (US Army)

(Right) A squad leader and his sergeant take a break during operations in Binh Hoa province. The lieutenant in the background is armed with a CAR-15 while the sergeant has a newer M-16 with a forward assist to ram home any round which may get stuck in the chamber. (US Army)

Jungle Uniforms

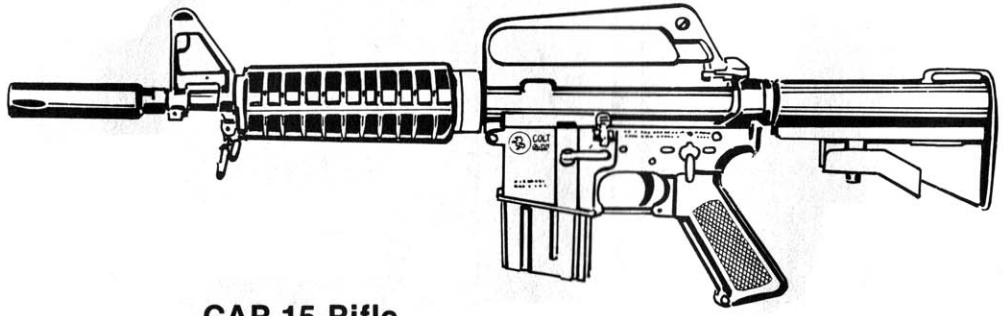
Exposed Buttons



Covered Buttons

Combat Boot

Jungle Boot



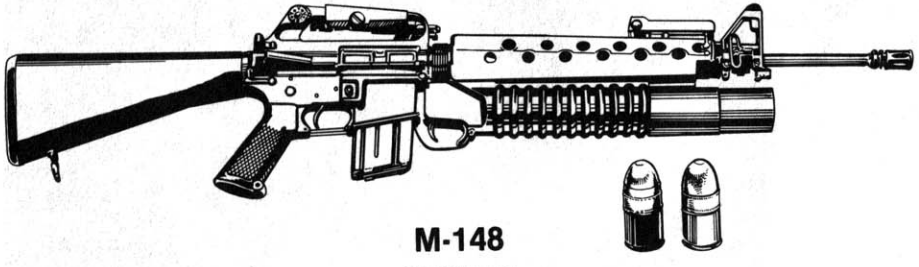
CAR-15 Rifle

This soldier gingerly moves over a tree-trunk bridge in the Mekong Delta.

(Above Left) Many attempts were made to provide the troops with better transportation in the delta area. This airboat, similar to ones used in Florida, is manned by soldiers from the 199th Infantry Brigade. They are taking part in a sweep through Gia Dinh province south of Saigon. (US Army)

In an attempt to combine the M-16 and M-79 into one weapon the XM148 was developed. However, it was felt that the performance of the M-79 was superior and this weapon did not gain widespread use. (US Army/Author)

(Above Right) A member of the Americal Division fires at a suspected VC position near Chu Lai as an M-113 stands ready to give support if needed. The Americal Division was the only unit of division size to be formed within Vietnam during the war. (US Army)



M-148

(M-16/M-79)

A dog handler and his German Shepherd rest during a patrol with elements of the 25th Infantry Division near Fire Support Base Wire. Dog teams trained together and if the handler was rotated home or wounded, the dog was not reassigned to another handler but put into different duties such as security. (US Army)

Vietnamization and Redeployment

The beginning of 1969 saw a new US President, Richard M Nixon, take office. One of his campaign pledges had been to hand the ground war back to the South Vietnamese. During the early part of the year little was done about this promise, US troops continued to operate in the field against the communists. However, the level of activity was extremely low when compared to the previous year. By the spring Nixon felt the time ripe to announce a major troop withdrawal of 25,000 men, to be completed by the end of August. Besides various logistic troops two brigades of the 9th Infantry Division were slated for this withdrawal.

Unfortunately the communists took advantage of this gesture to launch a series of attacks from their border sanctuaries in Cambodia. Units of the 1st Cav and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment were subjected to massive ground assaults but repulsed the enemy with heavy losses. In September, following the death of Ho Chi Minh, the North Vietnamese stepped up their activity north of Saigon. Most of these attacks were little more then quick forays from Cambodia with the intent of inflicting as many allied casualties as possible. Gone were the days when the communists could keep large units inside Vietnam. Most of the major fighting now centered around the border regions.

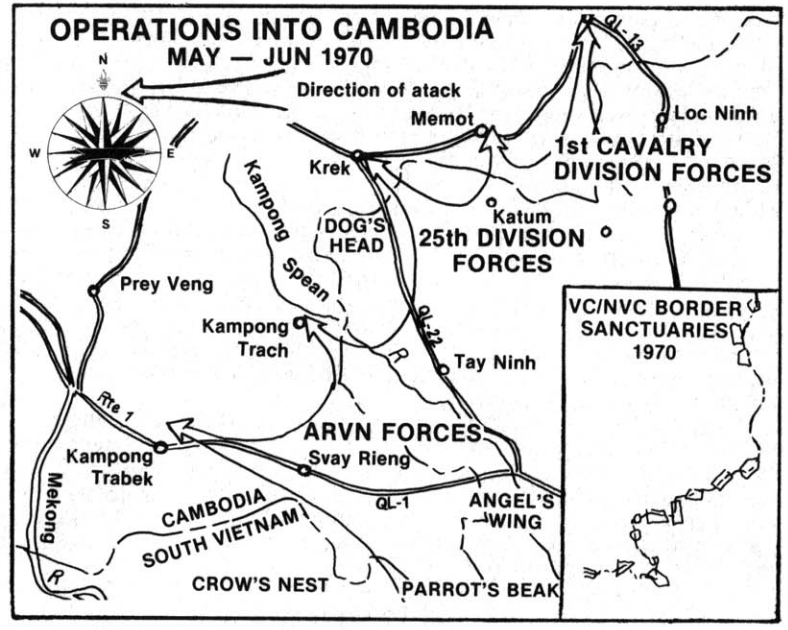
With this in mind, President Nixon felt it was safe to order more troops home, despite this upsurge of fighting. During the fall of 1969 US forces in the Mekong Delta turned over their responsibilities to ARVN units. An additional 40,000 men were rotated home by the end of the year, including the single brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division which had been deployed to Vietnam. As the level of fighting dropped off, those US forces which remained saw a substantial decrease in casualties.

The Cambodian Invasion

By the beginning of 1970 the enemy within Vietnam had been defeated. Scattered bands of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese still operated inside the country, but they posed no serious military threat to US or ARVN forces. American forces had been reduced from over 530,000 in 1968 to just under 340,000 by January 1970. During the first part of 1970 another 40,000 men were redeployed home, including the 1st Infantry Division and a brigade from the 4th Infantry Division. Even as these troop withdrawals were taking place, however, a serious problem still faced the United States. Even though the communists had been militarily defeated within Vietnam, they still had sizeable numbers of troops in various sanctuaries across the border in Cambodia and Laos. Although the US military command had often requested permission to clear these sanctuaries out, previous administrations had refused since this would have involved the invasion of a supposedly "neutral" country. Yet it seemed alright for the communists to occupy parts of these neutral countries and attack US and ARVN forces. Fortunately President Nixon realized the absurdity of the situation and decided that unless these sanctuaries were cleared the whole process of Vietnamization would be jeapordized. In the late spring of 1970, Nixon gave the order to move on the sanctuaries in Cambodia.

The initial thrusts into Cambodia were made by ARVN forces in mid-April. On 1 May the 1st Cavalry Division made an airmobile assault into the "Fishhook", a deep, narrow projection into Vietnam near Loc Ninh. At the same time elements of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment carried out a ground attack to link up with the airborne soldiers and destroy any enemy units or base camps caught in this pincer move. To the south of this drive, a brigade task force from the 25th Infantry Division hit hard at enemy troops north of Tay Ninh as they drove toward the Cambodian towns of Krek and Memot. Further north the 4th Infantry Division, in conjunction with ARVN forces, pushed into Cambodia from Pleiku and seized a hugh North Vietnamese base camp.

During the first week of the invasion over 1000 of the enemy perished in the "Fishhook" alone. Nearly 4,800 individual or crew served weapons, 100 trucks, 40,000 pounds of explosives, and a million rounds of ammunition were seized in the drive. On May 7th the invasion was expanded when the 3rd Brigade of the 9th Infantry Division struck the "Parrot's Beak", a curved projection which jutted into Vietnam to the south of Tay Ninh. As this drive got underway troops from the 1st Cav in the "Fishhook" uncovered a vast, sprawling complex of huts, bunkers, and supplies which encompassed over two square miles. This was nicknamed the "City", and as the complex was searched more material was uncovered, including a swimming pool.



A road patrol from the 173rd Airborne Brigade fires at a group of Viet Cong who tried to ambush them. Firing the .50 caliber machinegun exposed the gunner to return fire and most gunners wore a flak jacket for protection. The soldier's camouflage fatigues were not standard issue to infantry units and were probably bought from a Vietnamese store or on the black market. (US Army)

With the start of the second week of operations a joint US and Vietnamese Riverine force, supported by the 9th Infantry Division, sailed up the Mekong River into Cambodia. Their object was the 88th North Vietnamese Regiment which threatened the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh. Eventually ARVN units pushed on to an area near the Phnom Penh while US forces covered their flanks. In the other areas of the invasion this also became the standard practice as Nixon, in response to anti-war critics, decreed that US forces would only move approximately twenty-five miles into Cambodia. As opposition to this invasion grew in intensity in the United States, he further announced that all American forces would be withdrawn from Cambodia by the end of June. Thus, the communists withdrew as many of their units as possible beyond the twenty-five mile limit in and effort to wait out the US drive. New attacks were made to cut off as many of the retreating VC and NVA as possible before they got beyond the twenty-five mile restriction. Unfortunately, most of the enemy were able to evade these sweeps, but in their retreat they abandoned vast quantities of materials. By the middle of June the number of contacts dropped off dramatically and US troops spent the rest of the month removing or destroying the munitions and supplies they had captured. In accordance wih Nixon's directive the last troops pulled out of Cambodia on 30 June.

During the two month operation American casualties were 337 killed and 1524 wounded. Over 11,000 enemy soliders perished during this period, and their material losses set the communists back over a year in terms of mounting any sizeable offensive operations against South Vietnam. In the future, ARVN forces would return to disrupt attempts to re-establish base camps or supply lines in these areas, but these attacks would be without the help of US troops. It was felt that the South Vietnamese forces were now strong enough to keep these sanctuaries cleared without American troops.

Withdrawal

Following the Cambodian Invasion US troop redeployment increased sharply. From the end of the invasion to December, 1970, units from the 4th, 9th and 25th Infantry Divisions, plus the 199th Infantry Brigade, were withdrawn from Vietnam. These troop cuts dropped American strength to 250,000 men by the beginning of 1971, as troop strength dropped more and more of the fighting was shifted to ARVN forces. The only large scale ground operation that involved US forces was JEFFERSON GLENN, which was carried out with the ARVN 1st Infantry Division near Hue. Otherwise, the fighting slackened as American forces took up a more defensive posture throughout Vietnam.

During 1971 the bulk of US combat units were sent home. By year's end only the 3rd Brigade from the 1st Cav, the 196th Infantry Brigade, a few infantry battalions, and some cavalry squadrons remained in-country. To highlight this, President Nixon stipulated in November that U.S. troops were no longer to participate in offensive missions. Prior to this the last large scale operation by American troops took place near the old marine base at Khe Sanh. The 1st Brigade of the 5th Infantry Division began DEWEY CANYON II at the end of January to establish a base for the South Vietnamese incursion into Laos. This was the last major US ground action of the war. After the ARVN troops withdrew from Laos, the base was abandoned and the brigade pulled back to Quang Tre.

In 1972 all ground forces were withdrawn, despite North Vietnam's invasion during the spring. Only advisors and a few helicopter units still remained inside Vietnam. The war had come full circle. With the aid of airpower the South Vietnamese were able to stop the NVA drive. Finally, after a massive aerial assault on Hanoi the communist leaders agreed to a cease fire at the beginning of 1973. Despite this cease fire fighting continued between the communist forces and the South Vietnamese. In the two years which followed, the NVA forces grew stronger while ARVN declined in strength. During the spring of 1975 the NVA launched an all out drive to capture South Vietnam. Without US support South Vietnamese units fell apart. With communist forces on the outskirts of Saigon, Marines were sent in to protect the evacuation of all remaining American personnel. On 29 April, 1975 enemy rockets slammed into Tan Son Nhut airbase, killing two marines. These were the last U.S. servicemen to die in Vietnam. The next day, all Americans left Vietnam.

The war was over.

A patrol from the 4th Infantry Division makes final preparations before moving out from LZ Valentine. The value of the vegetation in the helmet band is questionable and was not often used by American troops. (US Army)

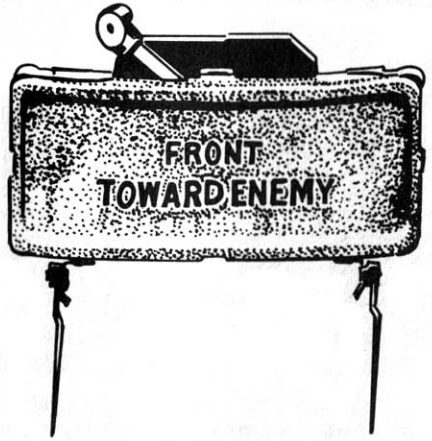
Streams were crossed in any way possible. Here a soldier from the 199th Infantry Brigade uses an air mattress to support his gear as he pulls himself across the stream on a rope stretches between the two banks. Although a good means of cooling off, this type of crossing exposed the soldier to a host of waterborne parasites that could cause serious infections and illness. (US Army)

A heavily laden machinegunner trudges up a hill near Pleiku. With all his gear, M-60, and ammunition he is probably carrying around eighty pounds of weight. It is easy to see how this could sap a mans strength, especially in the hot, hilly terrain of the Central Highlands. Although the belts of ammunition provide a quick means of ready access, their Brass color reflected in the sunlight and gave the enemy a few extra minutes of warning to set up an ambush or escape. (US Army)

A company commander radios in the discovery of a bunker complex to his battalion while other members watch for possible enemy snipers. The jungle fatigues proved very practical in the hot climate. Most of the men are wearing a towel around their necks. (US Army)

A group of American and ARVN soldiers interrogate a captured Viet Cong during a sweep by the Americal Division near Chu Lai in the summer of 1969. (US Army)

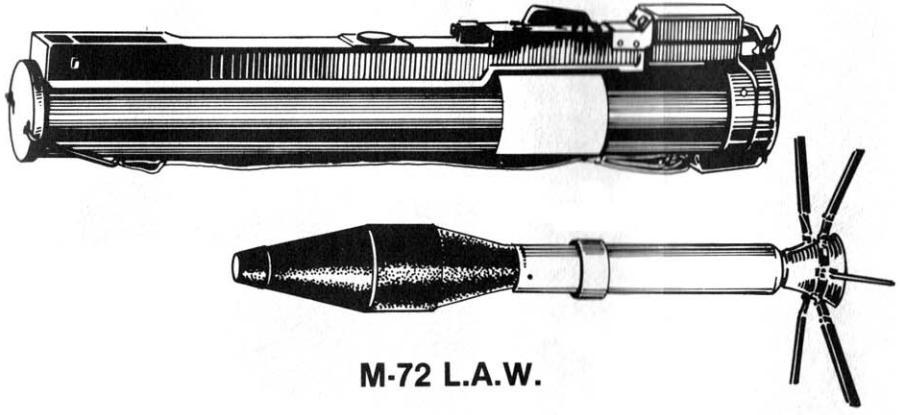
(Above Left) As the war progressed more and more soldiers became "hippy" and took to wearing beads and colorful scarves. Though this may have been a psychological boost for their moral, its affect on camouflage and concealment was counterproductive. (US Army)



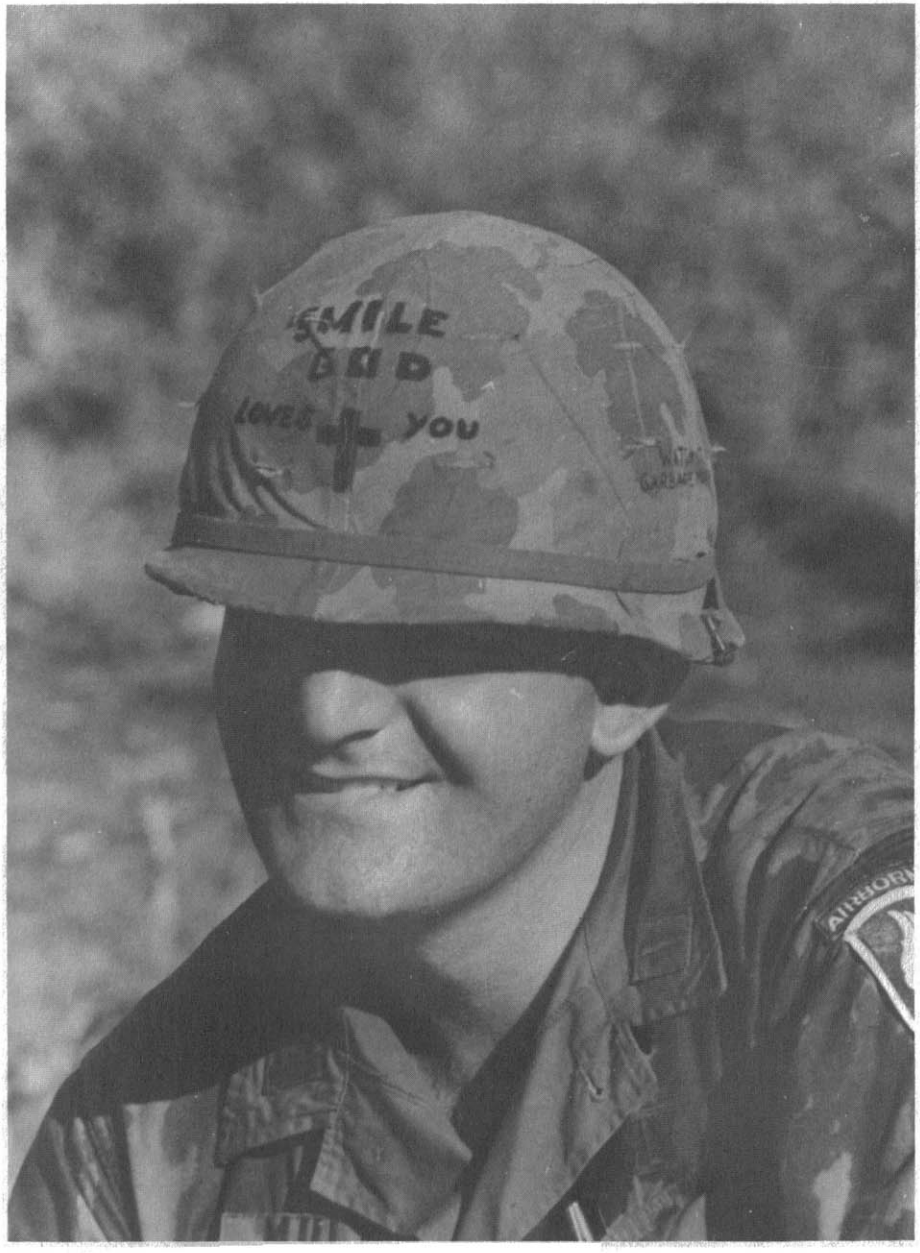
Claymore Anti-Personnel Mine

A soldier checks out cooking utensils for possible booby traps on Berri Island off the coast near Chu Lai. The ace of spades in his helmet was the card of death to the Vietnamese and many troops carried them as a psychological means of frightening the locals. (US Army)

As the process of Vietnamization took effect more and more emphasis was placed on fixed defenses to protect US forces. These bunkers are part of the main line of defense around an artillery base near Phu Bai. The wire fence in front will hopefully detonate any rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) which the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese might fire. (US Army)



M-72 L.A.W.



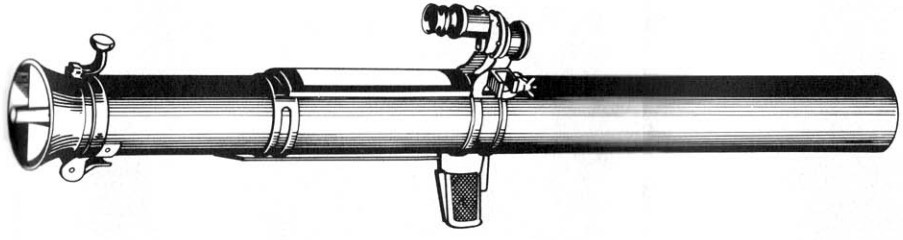
Helmet graffiti became very common as the war progressed. This photo shows one which obviously belongs to a chaplain. Most graffiti on the helmets was not repeatable in polite company. (US Army)

Mud was a constant companion in the Mekong Delta. This soldier from the 9th Infantry Division tries to clean some of it off after a firefight with a group of Viet Cong. His M-16 will be one of the first things cleaned up since the weapon was seldom able to function in such a state. (US Army)

A "tunnel rat" lowers himself into the entrance of a Viet Cong complex near Bien Hoa. In such confined space a pistol was far more suitable than a rifle. The gas mask helped protect him from gas or smoke which may have been pumped into the tunnel. (US Army)

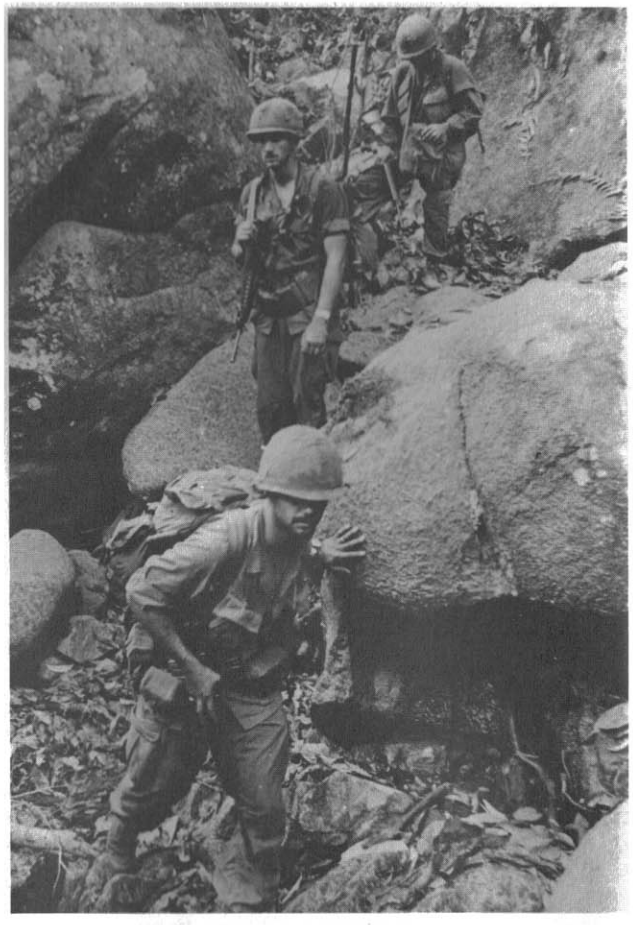
A platoon leader calls in an air strike during a search mission northwest of Lai Khe by the 1st Infantry Division. The small bottles in the helmet bands of the RTO and his backup are insect repellent and oil for their M-16s. (US Army)

(Above Right) Evacuating the wounded was always difficult, especially in the swampy terrain of the Mekong Delta or the coastal regions in I Corps. This soldier is being carried out of the jungle by his comrades from the 101st Airborne after an ambush by NVA troops. Such conditions made it very easy for a wound to become seriously infected. (US Army)



M-67 90mm Recoiless Rifle

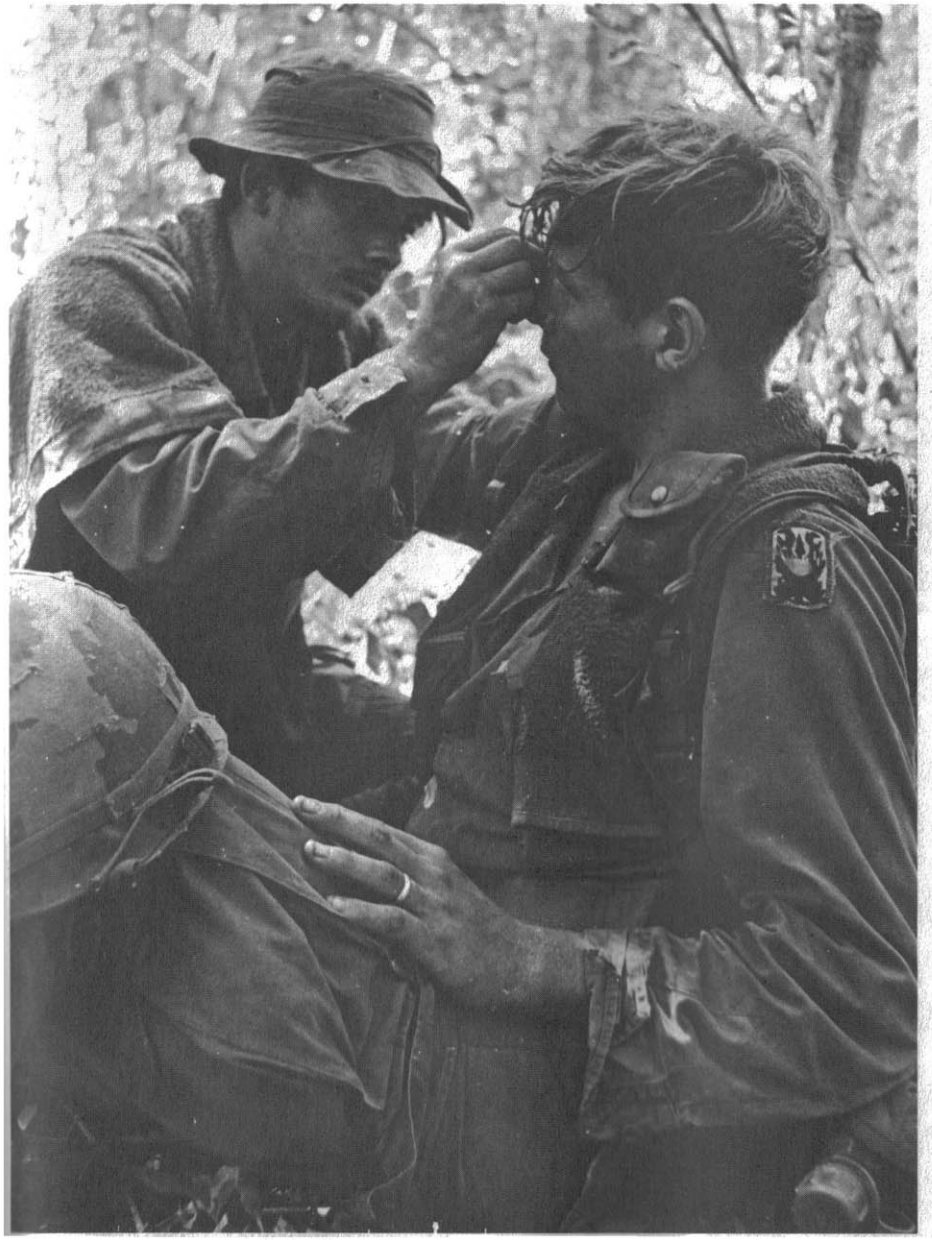
As the war began to wind down, US troops took more of a role in programs to win the people over to the South Vietnamese government. These soldiers from the 25th Infantry Division are providing protection for a medical team which is treating the people of a small village near An Duc. (US Army)



Members of the 199th Infantry Brigade descend through rocky ground to a stream bed during operations north of Saigon. The terrain in Vietnam was not just lush, tropical jungle or wet marshland. (Chernak/Seitz)

(Above Left) These soldiers are looking over the wreckage of a Huey that was shot down as it came into a "hot" LZ. Other troops watch for evidence of enemy activity as another helicopter approaches to bring in supplies and evacuate wounded. (Chernak/Seitz)

Men from the 25th Infantry Division follow a tank during an operation north of Tay Ninh in the middle of February, 1970. Although it was easier to follow the path made by an armored vehicle, any element of surprise was lost, which often allowed the enemy to either slip away or spring an ambush. The closest soldier is carrying an M-67 90MM recoilless rifle which proved very effective in destroying bunkers. (US Army)



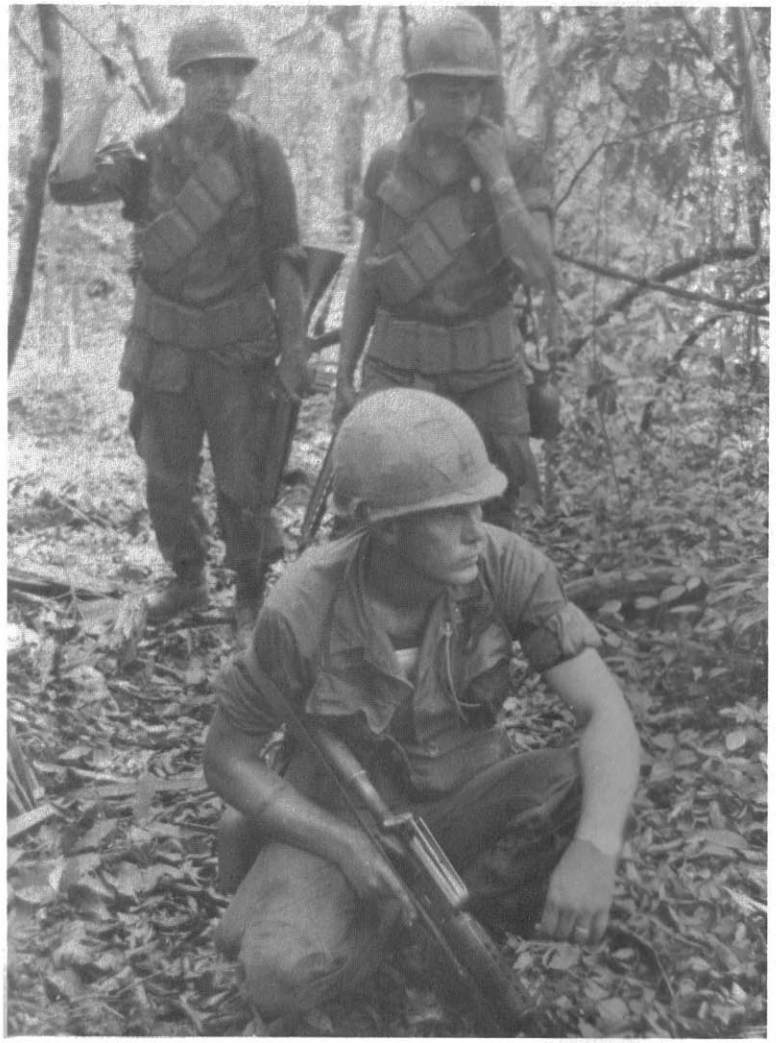
A medic from the 199th treats a minor wound in the field. Each unit had a number of corpsmen to handle casualties during the initial stages of a battle. Many acts of heroism were performed by these medics who were a prime target for enemy snipers. Often an American soldier was only wounded because the enemy knew a medic would try to get to the injured man, giving them the opportunity to pick the medic off. (Chernak/Seitz)

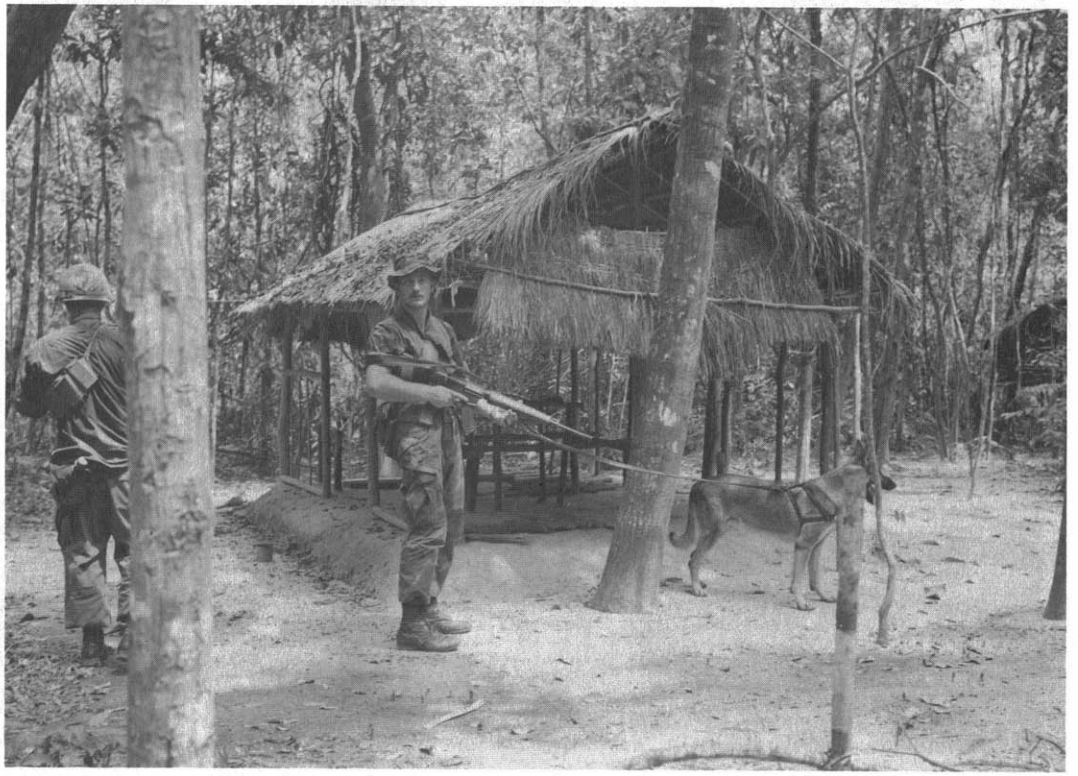
A patrol takes a break during a sweep near Fire Support Base "Libby" located approximately forty miles northeast of Saigon. Extra canteens are carried by the RTO. (Chernak/Seitz)

Members of the 173rd Airborne Brigade return enemy sniper fire while on a search mission north of the Ai Lao river near Bong Song. Enemy snipers were often so well camouflaged that the only way to kill them was by spraying the sniper's suspected area location with fire. (US Army)

(Right) A machinegunner from the 199th Infantry Brigade lays down a field of fire to provide cover during a helicopter assault into a "hot" LZ near Xuan Loc. A machinegunner was supported by an ammo bearer and sometimes another man to provide security in case of an enemy attack. Xuan Loc was the site of the final ARVN defeat five years later, during the spring of 1975. (Chernak/Seitz)

The major event during 1970 was the invasion of Cambodia which involved a combined helicopter and armored assault on enemy border sanctuaries. These M-113 APCs move into the Cambodian town of Snoul which was a vital center of logistics for the communist forces. (US Army)

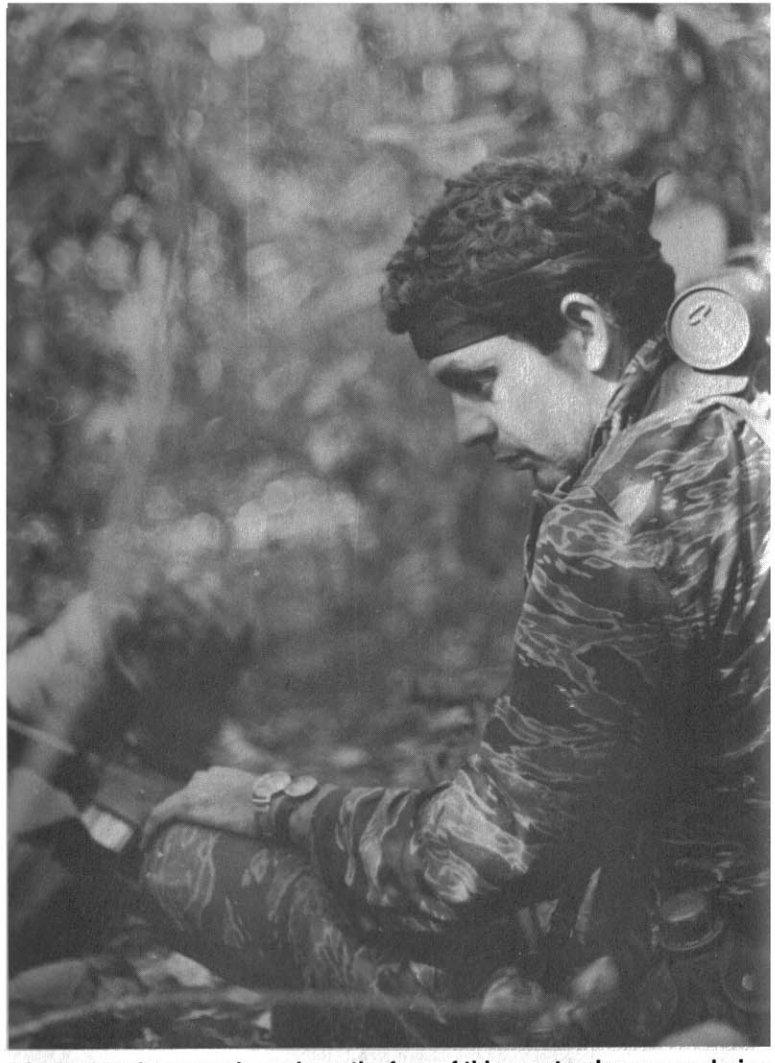




These troops pause to survey an area before moving on. The officer (foreground) holds a CAR-15. Ammunition and water were two of the most necessary items needed by troops in the field. The standing troopers have at least nine extra magazines of ammunition visible and they probably have more on their backs. Most soldiers carried as much ammunition as possible. (US Army)

(Above Right) A captain from the 199th questions a villager during a search. The shaving brush in his helmet is for cleaning the CAR-15 hanging on his shoulder. The shoulder patch is the low visibility type.

Members of a scout dog unit search an enemy training center inside Cambodia. They are from the 25th Infantry Division which was responsibile for the "Fishhook", an area to the west of Loc Ninh. The dog handler has a thirty round magazine in his M-16 which was rather uncommon. (US Army)



A look of obvious weariness is on the face of this grunt as he pauses during an ambush patrol. On such missions the men rarely carried heavy packs or wore steel helmets, both encumbered them which could prove fatal on an ambush mission. (US Army)

(Above Left) A huge amount of supplies and munitions were uncovered in the sweeps through the border sanctuaries. Members of the 25th Infantry Division examine ammunition and explosives which were captured near Snoul. The material will either be destroyed or removed by helicopters to Vietnam. (US Army)

A platoon leader tells his RTO to notify the company that they have uncovered a VC camp. Note the various smoke and hand grenades carried by each man plus the K bar carried on the back of the radio. (US Army)

These soldiers await the final journey home to their loved ones. Over 55,000 Americans died in Vietnam and surrounding countries and many of their bodies passed through this mortuary warehouse on the outskirts of Tan Son Nhut. If more of the politicians had visited this place they might have been willing to wage a war rather than playing politics with men's lives. (US Army)

Even though the Vietnam war has been over for many years reports persist that American servicemen are still being held as prisoners in Vietnam. Let us do all we can to insure that, if this is indeed true, every effort is made to get these brave men back. The people of the United States owe them that.

An RTO from the 60th Infantry, 9th Infantry Division, in the Mekong Delta near the village of Moi Cai, fall, 1969. Plastic bag on phone is to keep moisture out.

Near the Cambodian border, a LRRP scans the jungle for enemy activity. He is wearing the late war four color camouflage uniform, and has camouflaged his face with removable pigments.

A member of the 198th Infantry Brigade, Americal Division, rests during an operation near Chui Lai, in April, 1970. Many soldiers used their sox and locally purchased bags to carry additional rations and personal items.

Members of the 25th Infantry Division stand guard on the outskirts of a Cambodian village during the 1970 Invasion. The mixture of uniforms varied from unit to unit depending on the attitude of the commander.